

Chandrabasa

CHAPTER-I

THE FATAL PLUNGE

OVER the rich and fertile land of *Kerala*, there ruled in the years of long, long ago, a monarch, whose name was *Suddharmika*. Though he was by birth a Kshathriya Prince and could count in his lineage a long line of sixteen Kings, yet in his making there was little of the Kshathriya spirit. He was neither brave in battle nor clever in diplomacy; he tempered justice too much with mercy. In fact, he hardly answered the requirements of a king as prescribed in the Shastric books inasmuch as nature had endowed him in an abundant measure with the passive spirit, that makes the pious godly man of the forest.

Consequently, he was not suited to be a king. Of the gentler virtues of life, he had an overflowing measure but not of the martial ones. That rendered him valuable at many points. If he still continued to rule without being molested by his ambitious neighbours, it was because fortune had favoured him with an excellent soldier in the general of his army. The general was a good fighter and an instinctive leader of men; he braved dangers with the

spirit and enthusiasm of a hero. But, his character was not good ; scandalous stories were afloat, casting thick shadows on him. But the king would not dismiss him without being sure of his guilt. So, he waited for more conclusive evidence, till one day, when from an eye witness the report came to his ears of a heinous crime perpetrated by the general, the king's heart flamed with righteous indignation and he forthwith issued orders dismissing him.

This led to trouble for the king. The dismissed general was a clever man and knew how to do things. With an army of vagabonds he went about poisoning the minds of the neighbouring chieftains, and eventually succeeded in enlisting the active sympathy of a few of them to whom a portion of *Suddharmika's* land, as a spoil of war, was an irresistible bait.

But the king was unmindful of these events, as a deeper sorrow tormented him. He had no child, none of his line to succeed him. He incessantly prayed to God to remove from him the curse of childlessness and gave offerings to the temples and gifts to the Brahmins. At last relief came when the queen brought forth a son. The baby was healthy and surpassingly handsome. At his birth the common people rejoiced and made merry : the poor received doles of charity, the rich and the wise were entertained at a banquet. Astrologers came in large numbers to read the future of the child. They sat in a ring with a chart of stars in front and discussed

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in detail the healthy and baneful influence of every star. After a full two hours of loud and keen debate, the oldest of them stood up and shouted to the king, "O monarch! hear and rejoice! This child that is born to thee this day, is born under the best combination of all auspicious stars. God hath given him long life and plenty. Peace and prosperity shall mark his reign on earth. He shall be a great and good king and the neighbouring chieftains shall fall at his feet and pay him homage."

As this prophecy was uttered new hopes were raised in every breast; and a loud shout for joy was sent up by the crowd that waited outside in the court-yard. The astrologers were properly rewarded with gold, silver and ivory, and were taken out of the city in procession on elephants.

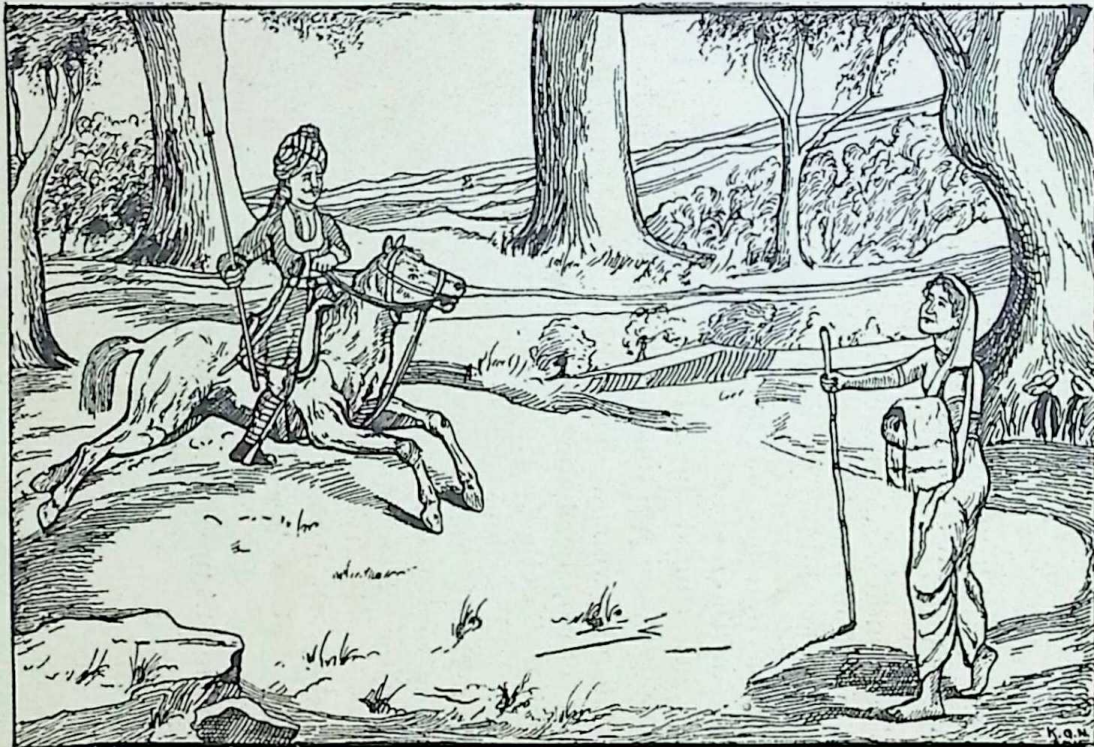
But fortune is fickle; it rises and falls like the spokes of a revolving wheel. Hardly had a month elapsed since the child was born when the dismissed general and his soldiers came down on *Suddharmika* like a devouring wolf, took the city by storm, captured and slaughtered the king and his army, and laid his fertile land desolate. To his loving and devoted queen, these happenings were unbearable; she was overwhelmed with grief and like a Kshathriya queen of olden times, she voluntarily entered the funeral pyre to make an end of her life.

The child alone escaped. During the confusion that arose with the destruction of the city and the capture of the palace, an old lady had the presence

of mind and the courage to remove the baby from the castle. When the conquering general had left the city leaving his garrison behind, she feared a search might be made for the missing child with a view to kill it. Therefore she hit upon a plan of escape. Accordingly, in the twilight of the early morning, she set out with the baby wrapped in rags to the city of *Kaunthala*, several miles away. The chill breeze of the morning and the sweating heat of the torrid sun, she had to bear in turn ; but, the devotion to the queen and her family in whose service she had grown grey, sustained her drooping spirits. Evening came when she was completely tired with no strength to go on. Under the shade of a spreading banyan tree, she rested for a while and again resumed her eventful journey.

She had hardly gone a few yards when she heard the trappings of a horse and a voice from afar, ‘Halt! who goes there?’ The old lady suddenly halted as if lightning struck. In a moment there stood before her a soldier on horseback, asking her, “what is it you are carrying in your bundle?” The rider was tired and hardly had breath to sustain the voice which he pitched in this high tone. He had been riding practically the whole day without a break, in search of a big prize and the prize was now well in sight.

“Sir,” said the old lady, “I am a widow and my husband was.....”



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'HALT! WHO GOES THERE?'

"I didn't ask you your life story, you foolish crone! Tell me quickly what is in your bundle or else I get down." So saying the impatient soldier was about to dismount when in faltering tones she continued, "this, sir, is the only thing that I am left with since the volcanic happenings of yesterday. In the turmoil of the siege I lost my children, seven sons and four daughters. This baby alone survives and he is the child of my eldest son."

So saying, she put her hand out to remove the clothes off the feet of the child. "No, show me the face," interrupted the soldier, dismounting in the meanwhile, and walking fast towards the jungle.

The old woman stood there, wondering if he would return, her hands trembling and her knees knocking together. Her hopes were blasted. Her scheme had fallen. But what was she to do? Steadfastly did her anxious eyes follow his footsteps till they were lost in the bushy growth. She waited for him for a couple of minutes in deep anxiety, and not seeing him return, quietly but quickly she walked into the dense forest near by and there, as she found herself well screened from view by the clustering trees that grew in abundance, she looked around intent upon a purpose.

"O God," she cried aloud, "this then is thy wish. Better be dead under the waters in the deeps of the earth with *Suddharmika's* child on my breast than leave him to the tender mercies of the wicked." Crying like this, she lifted up a huge stone and

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threw it down into a deep well on whose surface weeds grew in plenty. The stone went down with a crash and a splashing sound that was echoed by the forest. The soldier heard it and for a moment hesitated to move. He was in the grips of death; he was engaged in a fatal fight with a growling tiger that had deeply resented his intrusion into its bush. It was a brave and vigorous fight that the soldier put up for the rescue of his life. With the wonderful courage that the fear of death generates in the brave, he lifted up his arm and served such a terrific blow with the fist that the wild animal reeled and staggered under it.

This was the settling stroke that secured him the victory. But the thought of the prize had not left his mind. Not waiting to see whether the animal in whose jaws his life till now rested, was alive or dead, he rushed to his steed, stirred it up from its sleep and sped on into the forest in search of the well. Soon he stood in the thick of the trees looking this way and that. What was his joy when he espied at a distance the well with its fencing of loose stones. He spurred his horse on to the spot and looked down to see the ripple on the waters. "The dead child is to me as precious as the living," said he to himself, "all that matters to my master is that the child should not live."

The prize glittered before his eyes, as deep into the well he took the fatal plunge to serve a dinner to the water-snakes that played and swam beneath the marshy weeds.

CHAPTER-II

A PROPHECY

Into the city of *Kaunthala*, there came once, late at night, an old lady, who appeared to be mad. Her hair was dishevelled and her look tired and hungry.

"Oh Narayana!" she cried aloud, "is it for this I worked and sweated without rest or food? From the clutches of the enemy thou hast saved us miraculously. But hunger and thirst threaten to do what the sword of man hath failed to do." Her cry was not in vain.

"Come here," said a middle-aged woman in a harsh tone beckoning to her, "to-day I shall give you food but don't come here again. If you have to beg daily, you must go to the houses of richer men. We are poor and not in a position to help others."

"No," said the woman carrying the bundle, "to-day shall be my first and last here, for other days I shall find other means." As she said this, she walked up to the threshold of the house anxious to place the child on a mat.

"What is in the bundle that you carry in your rags? Is it the charity you have begged from other houses? These beggars are rogues. They get a lot and still beg to starve on plenty." This she said in a tone half irritated and annoyed, though in her heart burnt the spark of human love that took pity on the tired woman.

"I shall enter the house and then show you what a precious thing it is that I carry in the bundle. It is for that I have taken all the trouble in the world." As she said this, slowly she walked into the inside of the house and seated herself near the dimly burning light. Over her stopped her hostess anxious to see the treasure-trove. And what was her surprise and joy when from the ragged clothes peeped the face of a beautiful baby sleeping through its misfortune.

"How is it you have so young a babe?" asked the woman. For a moment, the old lady was in a perplexity. For a time she sat there, turning and dividing her swift mind this way and that, and at last decided to conceal the truth.

"This is the only thing that is left me since the destruction of *Kerala*. This is the youngest child of my son. My own children I lost, seven sons and four daughters." Her eyes were flooded as she said this and it drew sympathetic tears from her hostess, who took the child in her arms from the quivering hands and gave it a warm and loving kiss on its soft cheeks.

"What shall I do when it cries out for milk in the dark hours of the night?" she thought and went out to her neighbour to buy some milk. Meanwhile the baby woke up, and when she returned he was crying. She took the child in her arms and rocked it to sleep while the old woman took her meal.

"I love the baby dearly," said the woman getting up from her bed early next morning, "but what am I to do? Even for my pittance I have to labour all the day. There is none to help me. My fond husband died when I was twenty years of age and my parents refused to give me in marriage to any one later." Down her cheeks flowed tears of sorrow as in faltering tones she gave the old woman this bit of her painful story.

The woman continued, "and the child is an expensive thing. It requires milk. So, it is much better if you try elsewhere. Once in a way however, I shall be very glad to help you with a meal or a few coins."

"Never mind," said the old woman her lips trembling, "I understand your difficulties. I am sorry that your lot in life has been so miserable. I shall knock at other doors and see if they open. For the fatherless and the widow, there is a Guardian overhead. My thanks to you are inexpressible. How hospitable you were, when hunger and thirst stared us last night in the face with a murderous look."

As she said this, she took the baby in her arms and held him tight on her breast with his head hanging over her shoulders. There was a cheerful smile playing on his countenance and a magnetic look flashing from his eyes inviting his hostess to give him a parting kiss.

A PROPHECY

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Five years rolled on, which to the old woman, were as long as five centuries. Often during the time, she starved to lay by a dinner for her child; whenever she fell ill both had to starve together. The hardest lot came when going out one day, late in the night, she contracted a chill which soon developed into a serious illness. Within a few days she died. From that time, the poor boy had himself to beg his living. It was a sorry spectacle to see the son of a good and righteous monarch begging his food in the streets; but who could probe into the mystery that shrouded his being? He had a charm in his face and a grace in his look which won him many good friends. Food came to him unasked. Often his friends would take him to their homes; the mothers fondled and kissed him and gave him meals and sweets along with their own children.

One day, he got into the house of the chief minister of the king of *Kaunthala*. In front of it was a large court-yard where the boys of the street played and shouted.

"Get away, you fellows," cried out the minister looking down on them from the balcony; "you must clear out, all, at once." Along with him peeped out some astrologers who did not like to be disturbed in the important work with which they were attentively engaged. They had gathered there to consult the stars and predict the future of *Dushtabuddhi* the minister, and as they looked out they saw a crowd of happy faces. In their midst was a boy with a

princely halo about him, which easily gripped their attention. They called him up to the balcony and were struck by his face and bearing. His royal grandeur they could not mistake. It was soon confirmed by an old astrologer who stepped forward to study the face and palm of the boy, and walking towards the dais he cried out in a steady and loud voice,

“Hearken unto me o minister, and be not offended! The lad who stands yonder is born to be a king. He shall be the monarch of *Kaunthala* and if you live to see the day, you shall be his minister.”

The prophecy that was uttered cut short the proceedings. Though the future was so clear, yet the minister could not bear it. He suppressed the agony of his mind with a villainous smile and when the astrologers had left the palace began to ruminate on the prophecy.

Would his be the lot to serve a beggar boy? That was intolerable! He would rather immolate himself than surrender to such an ignominy. He had called up the soothsayers to predict his chances for the throne of *Kaunthala*. Villains all, they had belied his hopes. And what was more, he had to serve this beggar boy! That he would never do. But what certainty was there that the prophecy was true? Astrology was humbug and astrologers rogues. How could the stars of the heavens tell us what rested in the womb of futurity? However it was un wisdom to wait and see, like a fool, the

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course of events. Wise men look before as much as after.

Along with these thoughts came dark designs into the minister's mind to render the prophecy impossible, and in the gloomy hour of midnight he set his wicked heart upon a most wicked deed.

"The boy shall go, and there is an end of the matter," thought he in his dark mind, "there is no other effective alternative. If the matter is left to take its natural course all that I have done so far dissolves into an airy nothing. It was foolish then to have kept an eye on the throne of *Kaunthala*. Ah me! why then did I countenance the schemes of the wicked general? I set him firm on the throne of *Kerala*, and is he now to leave me to the Fates? Who shall answer for the murderous designs that have taken away from the land of the living that virtuous and peaceful monarch, the king *Sud-dharmika*? Have I not heaped on my devoted head the agony of his chaste and lovely queen, and more than all the silent curse of that young babe which was the delight of the men and women of *Kerala*? Three royal murders in a dreadful night! Ah! that is horrible. It is their blood that cries to heaven for vengeance. The rank smell of it envelopes my distressed soul. But I shall not be made a coward by conscience. I shall not linger or stop; what is begun must be ended."

Accordingly, early next morning before the cock had crowed to invoke the God of Day, the

restless minister called two of his servants and taking them into his confidence said, "there is a task which, if you bear me any love, I entrust you to do ; not love towards me alone but for the common weal as well ; love for your sons and daughters and for the vast generations that are unborn. For three nights, one after the other, the god of the heavens hath inspired me with a prophetic vision. Thrice repeatedly, did I see the figure of a boy dressed in rags and begging in the streets for food. And a growling voice muttered in my ears, "lo ! he is your future king." Since then, I have been looking in the streets to discover the boy, and I have found him ; he is the one who goes through the streets as the leader of a gang. It is not alone that he would rule us. That I would not mind, if it stood alone. The instincts of a beggar he would carry with him to the throne and he would rule us in a most beggarly way. From one end of the country to the other, bribery and injustice will hold sway, entailing most disastrous consequences to this prosperous land. Go you two together therefore this afternoon. I shall show you the beggar boy, whom seize you silently. Lead him to the forest and when you are gone far, slay him."

The soldiers dared not refuse nor question ; they patiently heard him till the end and made a low obeisance to signify their readiness. "And when you have slain him," added the minister, "get me a relic of his body as an assurance of his death."

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CHAPTER-III

THE EXTRA TOE

The sun rose behind the hills with his usual resplendence and there was nothing amiss about the day. In his supreme innocence, the beautiful beggar boy felt life cheerfully coursing in his veins; he knew little of the bitter things that the day kept in store for him. Before sundown, however, he found himself in the company of two sturdy soldiers. They were leading him on through solitary paths; he did not know where. They gave him sweets perhaps to sweeten the purpose that worked in their minds.

"Where do you take me through these solitary paths?" asked the boy, instinctively feeling in his mind some ominous forebodings whose exact meaning he did not know, "how far away are the things you talked to me of?"

"They are near," said one of the soldiers looking down. He was unable to withstand the sweet innocence that played in the boy's cherubic countenance and the diamond sparkle in his eyes. The other was tipsy; he unsheathed the sword that was hanging at his side. In his hands the fearful weapon flashed in the slanting rays of the setting sun as he stretched it out towards the boy saying,

"If you want it you may have it even now."

"What is it?" said the boy startled. He did not know what the soldier meant. Still it was a ghastly weapon that would strike terror into the stoutest heart.

"For what is it used?" he asked again with an enquiring look.

"This is the thing we spoke of," said the drunken soldier, "this shall give you first death and after that are joys and happiness."

"Death!" the boy could hardly repeat the word. He stood there, still, like a pillar, hair on end. His lips parted and his eyeballs almost jumped out from their socket. Death! he at once remembered his foster-mother. She was dead, he knew. There was consolation in the thought that in that distant land he could see her again. But there were greater joys here. Friends and games and mothers' kisses and sweets; would he have none of them? The thought of these things rushed into his memory like gushing waters and suddenly he burst out into loud weeping.

"Stop crying," said the drunken soldier, "or else I will kill you at once," and turning to his comrade who gave the boy some sweets, he rated him, "what a silly fellow you are to be moved by meaningless cries! You are fit for nothing on earth that is heroic and brave. Drive the woman out of you. I'll tell the minister that you cannot be entrusted with courageous duties, and of the gift that he has

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promised. I shall have the lion's share if not all of it."

By this time the boy had ceased weeping and began to eat what the kind soldier gave him.

Before him walked the other soldier. His heart was steadily set on a purpose that assured him a decent living and he would not, for anything, let a beggar boy stand in his way.

Dusk was falling when the party neared the end of their terrible journey. In front of them a wild forest arose, its green thick foliage lit up by the delightful crescent moon. Right across ran a clear deep stream that reflected the glory of the Milky Way; its sides were fringed with shades of green, perhaps to shelter the weary travellers who passed that way. The twitter of the birds come home to roost, the roaming of the gentle deer free from the fear of sportsmen, the frolic and the creeping of the serpents with their glossy scales and rings, all lent the scene an appearance of gaiety and innocence. It was in such a spot that a most heinous crime was arranged to be perpetrated.

"Be ready," said the drunken soldier gradually coming to his senses, "the minister wants your death and we can't help it." He uttered the words in a tone that suggested a growing unwillingness to do the deed for which he showed so much avidity but a short while ago.

"Pray, why should the minister want me to die? What wrong have I done him that I should

deserve this at his hands? His son is my dearest friend and we have never quarrelled."

"No wrong so far ; but your future shall wrong him." He uttered these words and unsheathed the fiery sword. It flashed in the slender rays of the crescent moon that peered through the green leaves of the thick forest. The boy trembled at the sight of it, and as he saw it slowly being raised to the level of his neck, in utter helplessness, he lifted up his hands in prayer to God and said, "O God, the Friend of the poor and the Succour of the distressed, save me, an orphan boy, from the sword. Show me my mother."

This was the first time that he had uttered a prayer since his foster-mother's death, and he did not know what else to say. The sparkling tears that flowed down his cheeks and the blissful innocence of his face were irresistible. They spoke with the moving eloquence of deep silence.

"Why should we kill him, Rahuka ? He is such an innocent boy. What crime has he done that he should be murdered like this? Would you like your own child to be hacked to death?" said the kind-hearted soldier. Tears rushed down Rahuka's cheeks when he saw the boy in the act of prayer and heard the reference to his own son. He had himself lost his eldest only six months ago and in all sober moments he was haunted by the memory of the child.

THE FINDING OF A BOY

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"No, I shall not kill him," said he with strong determination, "for the life of me I shall not murder this boy. He is so sweet, so innocent, fresh and lovely like a morning flower." Then he suddenly struck his sword against a projecting piece of hard rock with such strength that it broke. He would have left the boy there, or led him out of the forest into a far-off city, had not the other referred to the relic which the minister had enjoined on them to bring; as for the handsome present that the minister had promised he did not care to have so much as a pie of it.

All that they now thought upon was a way out of the difficulty; and as they looked at the boy, suddenly Rahuka's eyes fell on an extra toe that projected from his right foot. "This shall save us," exclaimed he with a leaping heart; "we shall gently cut this off and take it to the minister. We have to deceive him but thereby we shall save the boy." The other agreed and held the boy tight to let Rahuka cut off the projecting toe with a piece of the broken sword. It was a most cruel deed flowing with the milk of human kindness.

 CHAPTER-IV

THE FINDING OF A BOY

"God bless the man who first invented sleep," said Sancho Panza in Don Quixote. To no one has sleep been at any time more soothing than to the

child who lay there in the forest on a bed of grass under the shade of a margosa tree. The still music of the waters that flowed by his side lulled him to sleep. On his face waved the mountain breeze that came laden with the fragrance of the flowers of the spring, and the moon shed upon him her quiet light. There he lay for hours together, like a creature native and indued unto that element. When he woke up late next day from his deep sleep, and attempted to stand up and walk to the stream, he felt the intense pain of the unhealed wound and burst into loud groans.

Just at that moment a huntsman had come to the forest with a large retinue of followers and hounds. He heard the accents of the wail whose note was different from what he was accustomed to hear. From early youth he had come there almost every week to levy his toll of game, and had often heard the bleating of the sheep carried off from the distant meadow by the hungry tiger. The warbling of the birds, the hissing of the forest snakes, and the cry of the deer were all different in kind from this. What he heard now had the note of the human voice. "Who could there be," he thought, "in this wild forest unfrequented by man, wailing like one on his death-bed. From where could have come this painful cry?" With these reflections, the huntsman wended his lonely way, leaving his comrades behind, to catch a glimpse of the source of the voice. Hardly had he gone a few yards, when there stood half bent before

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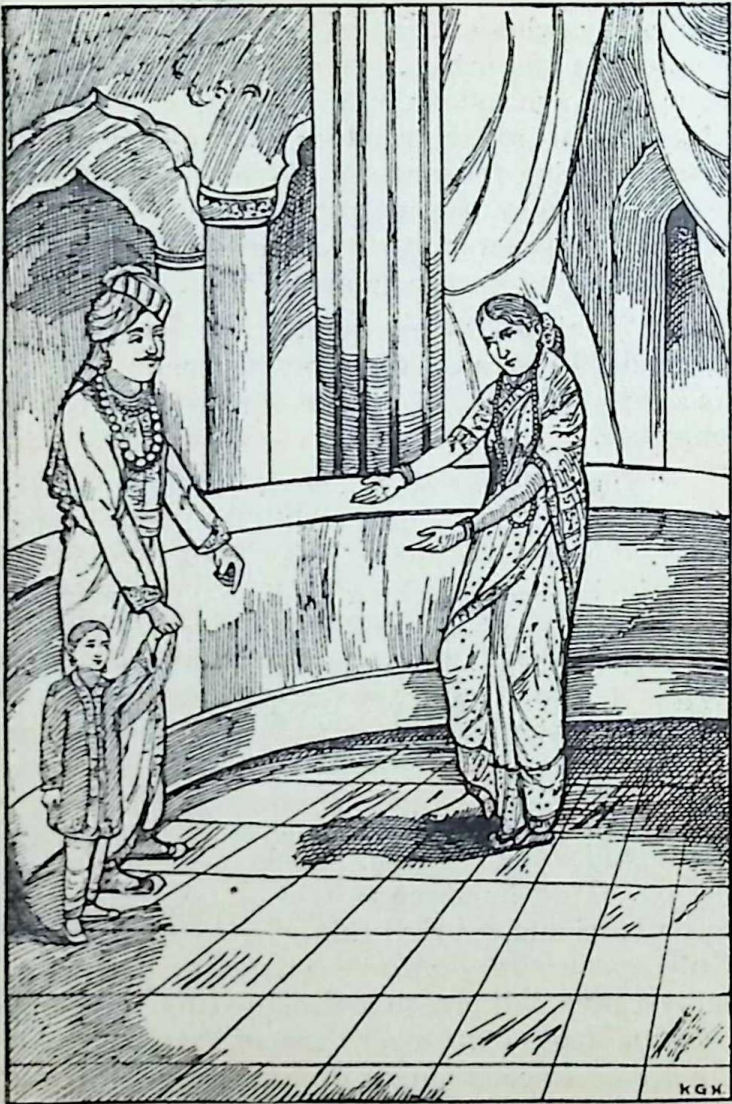
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him a boy whose face, though faded, carried the suggestion of a prince. He held the boy erect, and stooping down to look into his face, was so deeply struck by his royal grandeur that, abandoning the hunt, the king returned to his palace in *Chandanavati* to make a present of this living booty to his queen. It was a matter of surprise to her to see her lord returning so soon from the hunt.

“What is it, my lord, that brings you so hurriedly back to the palace with such a cheerful face?” said she to him as he came up to the entrance.

“The hunt is over, my dear. To-day I have kept your instructions. I did not kill the innocent stag in sport. Upon your advice, I have brought him alive. Here he is,” said the king leading the young boy to her. His charming face and the innocent gleam of his eyes immediately aroused her motherly instincts. With a smile full of affection, she ran up to embrace him, overwhelming him with endless kisses.

“Let him stay with us,” said she to the king, “we will bring him up. Look at his face and his person. How handsome are his hands! He shall be a son to us and the rightful heir to *Chandanavati*. Only a little time ago, when you were away for the hunt I was talking to our old matron, and saying how unhappy I was over the fact that we have no children. I even thought of bringing to your notice the advisability of taking a second wife who might



" She ran up to embrace him "

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beget you a child. However much I knew that your affection would not let you do it, I felt it was the only way out of the difficulty that envelopes us, lest our country should go into disintegration and ruin. Now, however, there is no need for it. He fills up the gap in our lives. But pray, tell me how you came across so sweet and handsome a boy?"

"I will tell you," said the king, nodding his head, "there is an element of wonder running through the event. On my way to the forest to-day, I saw the head of a goat dripping with blood. Marks were on its face of the claws of the deadly tiger. The sight of it harrowed my soul. Ah, methought; see the cruelty of untamed nature: The innocent goat forfeits his life to satisfy the elemental needs of a growling wild beast. But in that critical musing, I did not indulge long. Suddenly I felt that my mission to the forest was essentially the same in substance as that of the tiger. The harmless deer caters but to my instinct of sport. The tiger has at least a reason and purpose, for me there is none. At once I resolved to forswear hunting; in the meantime I had reached the forest and lo, a plaintive cry greeted my ears."

"Blessed be the God that hath taught you the lesson, though late in life," replied the queen, "how often have I told you that the shedding of innocent blood is the reason why I am childless. The moment you determined to abandon hunting, God hath blessed you with a beautiful child. Take that lesson

deeply to heart." The king was glad and bowed to the superior wisdom of his queen; he ordered his servants to wash the boy's wounds and pour into them the juice of healing herbs. It was done and the boy felt in his wounds a deeply burning sensation. As the feeling died away, he grew tired and gradually fell asleep. He woke up refreshed and calm, and in his childish simplicity imagined the bitter events of the previous night as the fleeting pictures of a dream.

The abandon of his smile and the grace of his manners easily endeared him to his foster-parents. From the moment of his coming in, they felt their life invested with a new meaning, and poured the unspent affection of years on the child who filled up the deep void of their life. They asked him his name and his ancestry; but in the fresh lease of life that was vouchsafed to him, he forgot the past; and as he could give no intelligent answer they had themselves to find him a name. That was an easy task; for so beautiful was his face and so much like the moon, that quickly with the instinct of a mother, the queen called him *Chandrasahsa* which means, one who is moon-faced.

The boy lived in the palace as their own child, growing into a strong and sturdy youth beloved alike by God and man.

Endowed by nature with a handsome appearance he improved on it under the supervision of the athletic experts of the land. His physique was

strong and robust and he excelled his comrades in all kingly arts. In wrestling and archery, in sports and games *Chandrasahsa* was always the first. His reputation for learning and wit was no less wide. To these he added such excellence of character, real humility, and pleasing conduct that all the elders in the land looked on him as a perfect model of youth.

When *Chandrasahsa* attained the age of eighteen he began actively to enter the affairs of the state. Age was advancing on his father who now expressed a desire to spend the evening of his life in the forest in meditation and in prayer. But his queen who was deeply attached to him would not separate, however much he might plead with her. Neither was *Chandrasahsa* of age to take on himself the heavy responsibilities of a sovereign. The king had no desire to rule; he marked time in order to leave the royal sceptre in the hands of his son.

CHAPTER-V

REBELLIOUS CHIEFTAINS

It was then that orders came to the king of *Chandanavati* from his overlord Subuddhi, the monarch of *Kaunthala*, that unless steps were taken to suppress the rebellious chieftains and peasants, and force from them the taxes that had fallen in arrears for over a dozen years, the king of *Chandanavati* would be expelled from his feudatory throne and another would be set up in his place. Having

for long entertained the idea of going to the forest as the last stage of his life, the king would not have minded the threat of his overlord, but the affection that he bore to *Chandrasahsa*, whom he had chosen as the legal successor to the throne, made him uneasy. To leave him now without a throne to ascend and with no people to rule, was an undesirable consummation. At the same time, he was far too advanced in age to recover by force of arms the fealty and homage that were his due. Caught thus on the horns of a dilemma he brooded over the situation, day in, day out, and at last made up his mind to acquaint his son of the knotty question that was daily eating away his vitality.

“Come,” said he to *Chandrasahsa* one day, “here is the order from our overlord *Subuddhi*. It is in the nature of an ultimatum; I never for a moment thought that the king of *Kaunthala* was so hard as that.” This he said little suspecting the hand of the minister *Dushtabudhi* busily working beneath the surface. It was he that had screwed up his master to this high pitch with an eye on the throne of *Chandanavati*. *Chandanavati* was, of course, a difficult land to govern and did not yield much revenue. The minister, therefore, had not himself much desire for it. Yet in spite of its unattractiveness, that was enough for a friend and an accomplice of his, who had in turn promised him his active support to oust *Subuddhi* from the throne of *Kaunthala* and win it for him and his family.

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"Is that all, father?" said the impatient youth, quickly glancing through the order, "you need not worry yourself over it. I shall go and have everything done for you."

"Ah!" replied the father laughing, "the task is not so easy as you imagine. I have been at it longer than the past six years, and have not extracted even so much as a pie. They are villains, those chieftains, and won't easily yield."

"Never mind," said *Chandrahassa* smilingly, "I hope to succeed where you have failed. When justice is on the side of strength, it is not withstood by the greatest forces on earth." So saying, the young man walked to his stable, chose his favourite horse, and mounting it, shot into the street like an arrow, his heart leaping for joy with the courage that challenged dangers.

Within four hours of riding *Chandrahassa* reached his destination. He alighted from his horse and issued a proclamation that the chieftains should quickly assemble in the choultry. His stately appearance and flashing eyes struck terror into a few of the weaker chieftains who came to the rendezvous with what wealth they had in their treasury. "Where are the others?" roared *Chandrahassa*, "I must get the answer at once or else———" He had not completed his sentence before some more came forward yielding, "we promise to pay up our arrears within a few days." "No," said the prince, "I can't wait as long as that. I must have them

before sundown or else I'll take such steps and do such things as you will be sorry for." *Chandrasahsa's* tone and expressions were so commanding that they felt that it was impossible to resist; and to abscond was to lose their possessions. So they brought him at once what was stored up in their cellars and treasuries and paid up all their arrears. There were still a few who were obdurate and would not yield. They thought that the young prince would not challenge them to fight; he appeared so poorly equipped.

However, they were disillusioned. When night fell with the small band of servants whom he had taken with him, the prince forced his way into their midst. It was not easy to get at the innermost cellars of their houses; thick darkness enveloped the passages. But his eyes flashed fire and his heart throbbed with enthusiasm. He elbowed his way through the throng, dealing blows on either side, and, entering the cellars, began to loot and plunder. At break of day, he found himself in possession of much wealth. There was no need to stay any longer; besides here was danger. Mounting his horse at once, he threatened them with eviction in case of another default and rode back to *Chandanavati*, the servants bringing behind him large bags of loot on their horses.

At about nine o'clock in the morning, *Chandrasahsa* reached the palace. His mother, who in deep

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anxiety had been looking towards the east watching for her son's return, saw him at a distance and came down with the king to greet him at the gate. What was their joy when behind him came the few horsemen carrying huge bags of loot on the backs of the jaded creatures!

"How was it all?" asked the old king when *Chandrahasa* came within hearing distance.

"A big success," cried out the prince who hardly had breath to say so much. Meanwhile, he dismounted, drank some cold water, and began to relate his adventure.

"It was heavy fighting against tremendous odds. They first tried to dodge me and postpone the evil day with a view perhaps to enlisting an army in the meantime. But I saw through their game and would not yield. I said, 'here and now you must pay your arrears;' some of the chieftains were naturally well disposed towards me; but the company of the wicked spoils them. And who in the world would pay away money for nothing when it is the easiest thing to store it up in one's cellar? Only a few refused payment till the end. On them I was merciless. They imagined that I was too young to fight; but I fell on them like a wild bull. Still it was heavy fighting and it is wonderful how they dodged you so far. They are all villainous rascals, all, and must be evicted. Already I have threatened them effectually; I hope they won't easily forget the lessons of yesterday."

In the meantime a meal was prepared and *Chandrasahasa* sat down with his parents to eat. It was a hearty repast growing in flavour as the young prince detailed, with effective gestures, his adventures of the night and how he fought the rebels and won. They gazed at him with wondering eyes and rejoiced that the land of *Chandanavati* had the fortune to possess in him a brave and doughty warrior. When the meal was over, the prince himself packed up the loot in a few big bundles and ordered his servants to take them to the king of *Kaunthala*. Not a bit was kept back though his parents desired it; it would be dishonest; to do so thought *Chandrasahasa*.

The king was all joy to receive the treasure. It was wealth that he had long thought as lost, but now it came as a windfall. "The minister is a wise and diplomatic man," thought he; "he knows how to do things and how to get things done. But for his ingenious move all this was lost wealth. Let him, therefore, have a share; he deserves it." Thereupon, he ordered one of his sturdy servants to pick out a big bundle and to carry it to the minister. The servant had no choice except to obey; he bent his back to receive the load and walked on to the minister's palace, grumbling and murmuring, and cursing in his heart the wicked and hateful minister.

"Here is a bundle," said he indifferently, unloading himself in the court-yard, in front of the

ministers's palace, "which the King of *Kaunthala* has asked me to carry to you."

"What does it contain?" asked the minister walking up to the bundle and untying it. Plates of gold and silver, costly jewels and ivory toys of exquisite workmanship, and raiment of the finest muslin and silk, shone and glittered in his eyes as he peeped in.

"How did the monarch get these?" asked the minister, his heart leaping for joy. "Where did he get them from?" he asked again with a look full of enquiry.

"I do not know," said the servant, "my back is aching. The king is specially hard on me. Just because I look a little sturdy, he throws on me the heaviest burdens and I must carry them. Really I am not half as strong as he takes me to be. At this advanced age I can't carry even a tittle of what I could formerly do. Still the king takes me for the young man I was twenty-five years ago."

The minister was not in a mood to listen to this grumble; his mind was otherwise busy. Where did the king get it from? That was the question that engaged his mind, when, in an indifferent tone, he called out his son *Madana* and asked him to pay the fellow a coin and send him away. The servant was none too glad to receive this trifling gift in return for the heavy load of treasure that he carried. What he grumbled at was not really so much the weight of the load as the inadequateness of the

meed which from the experience of the past he knew the minister would give him. He murmured as he stooped down to pick up the small coin; he dared not speak aloud.

As the king's servant went out, the minister had the load taken inside and when he had locked it up safely in an underground cellar, lest *Madana* should fritter away any part of it in gambling, he dressed himself in his finest raiment and hurried to the monarch with a cheerful countenance. As he approached the palace gate *Subuddhi*, who had observed him coming at a distance, went to greet him with joy, and said smiling, "the king of *Chandana-vati* has not lost all his warlike spirit. It is no easy thing to yoke those rebellious chieftains and he has succeeded splendidly well. The difficulty is that nowadays he must be pricked on to such heroic deeds. Of late, religious tendencies have been in evidence in him which induce him to despise wealth and all its glory. Let him be under any influence; what does it matter to us, so long as he collects our dues?"

As these words fell on his ears, the minister grew pale and his heart sickened. He had gone to the royal palace to enquire the source of the treasure, and the answer was the fatal blow to his plans. What if he got a large load of wealth as his present? It was nothing and would pale into insignificance were he to succeed in his enterprise. The gain of a load of gold meant for him the loss of a throne.

He had enjoined on the feudatory king to do the impossible and he had done it; that entirely upset his plans.

“My schemes are of no avail. For the destruction of the *Kerala king* I strained my nerves. I succeeded, but the country passed into the hands of a bastard youth. Here is another mischief that I set on foot. But woe is me, it comes to nothing.” These were the thoughts that the minister silently uttered when, like a perfect master in the art of dissimulation, he bowed gracefully before the king, and after the exchange of ordinary courtesies left the palace, crest-fallen, his heart beating fast and his brain working furiously to hatch new mischief.

CHAPTER-VI

VILLAINY AGAIN AT WORK

“It is a really glorious victory that you scored over the rebellious chieftains,” said the minister one day, arriving at the palace of the king of *Chandanavati*. Sleepless nights had told heavily on his health. His eyes were dim and his cheeks were sunken. In his bosom worked villainy more disastrous than ever before; still the cunning smile and the tapering nose were his. “They are rascals,” added he, “and deserve to be evicted. Did they come to actual fighting? How did you manage to extract from them so large an amount of wealth?”

"This is the work my young son achieved. He is a heroic lad," answered the king.

"Which son?" interrupted *Dushtabudhi* with a look of surprise, "when was a son born to you? How is it I was not informed of his birth? Last time when I came here on a visit, that is about twelve years ago, there was such a gloomy atmosphere enveloping the palace that I enquired of you the reason. Then you told me that your people, no less than your queen were sorrowing that you had no child. Since then has your queen borne a son? Even so, could he be of years to go and win you this treasure? He must then be an exceptional lad. For, if I remember right, he could not be more than eleven years of age." The minister wanted to say something more but the king interrupted.

"Yes, about twelve years ago, if my memory may be trusted, nearly a fortnight after your previous visit, I went out as usual a-hunting to the forest that lies on the boundary that separates our kingdom. My wife used often to instruct me not to slaughter the innocent animals that roamed about in the forest. For us, it is sport, for them it is death, that was her argument. She often said that we had no offspring because I killed the harmless beasts. Generally, I used to laugh over it. That day, however, I thought that instead of killing the deer, I would bring it to her alive. With this thought I entered the forest, when into my ears

there came through the still air of the morning, a plaintive cry. I turned the rein of my horse and spurred him on to trace from where the cry was raised. Within a hundred yards from there, close to the river that runs across, I saw a boy stooping and weeping as if in intense pain. It was a most distressing sight. Having dismounted, I lifted him up in my arms, and looked him in the face and was deeply fascinated by his princely look. Thereupon I ordered the day's hunt to be stopped, and galloped back to the palace, to make a present of him to my queen. Oh! What was her joy to have him! She took him in her arms and kissed him and with an air of triumph said, 'did I not say that the killing of the harmless deer is the reason why we have no children? Now see, the moment you entertained the idea of saving the stag, God hath given you a child.' I had nothing to say in return. We were both glad and have since then brought him up as our own child. He is now nearly twenty and we propose to bequeath to him our throne. What say you to it?"

To the minister the story was most incredible. A thousand thoughts flashed across his mind and with the thousand thoughts came and flitted a thousand expressions in his face. Anxiety, wonder, fear, dejection each was in turn seen on his face in quick succession. At length summoning up all his courage, and concealing to the best of his ability all the changing sentiments of his mind, he called for the boy. Suddenly there stood in front of

him a tall and handsome youth, fair, strong and healthy. The minister quickly recognised in him the beautiful child on whose life he had made a treacherous attempt less than a dozen years ago. The clear outline of the child's face was still there though considerably modified by the adolescence of youth. No further proof was necessary; the face told the tale and he was convinced of the truth; still, to make assurance doubly sure, he directed his look to the ground, examining the foot of the boy. And what was his surprise to note on his right foot the mark of a wound as of a toe that had been cut off! His feelings suddenly overpowered him; he could not stay there a moment longer. He did not wait even to take the food that was ready. Abruptly he left the palace, with a bitter heart cursing his fate and breathing destruction and woe on all traitors.

The way back was difficult and tedious. It looked a hundred times longer than when he was going to *Chandanavati*. He was completely unnerved and could not keep his attention to direct the horse. Different thoughts came crowding in his mind, but none more vividly than the prophecy about the orphan boy. His plans had failed and his confidants had betrayed him. There was bitterness in all that; there was despair. But he had placed his hand on the plough and would not turn back.

Reaching home, he endeavoured to put on the best smiles. His heart was sick and he did not sleep at night. For a week he lived in his palace in

Kaunthala, and once again set out to *Chandanavati* with a purpose. Behind him rode a servant carrying a bundle of half a dozen gold and silver plates, chosen most carefully from the worst part of the sack load. Anxiety sat on the minister's face as he rode to *Chandanavati*, and his lips moved as he muttered in detail the tricks up his sleeves. Within a few hours of riding he alighted in front of the palace and called on the monarch.

"How is it?" asked *Chandrahasa* who went up to open the gate for the minister, "you left us last time abruptly without a word. It was very unkind of you not to have accepted our hospitality." To this the minister replied with a blank smile.

"That is precisely why I come here again. In the midst of the conversation last time, the thought of an engagement of an important nature which I had arranged with the king, struck my mind. It was in connection with the high policy of the state. To have stayed here a moment longer would have entailed the great hardships of a war to our country. Setting aside at the time, all formalities of departure, I sped back to *Kaunthala* and if I had made a moment's delay matters would have been very different."

Chandrahasa heard these words and had no desire to pry more into the secrets of the minister; he bowed with respect and led him to his father. As soon as the minister found himself in the presence of the king, he offered him the bundle of plates

and said in low and halting tones, "be pleased to take this from me. *Subudhi* is not the sort of man to show any generosity. Out of bare courtesy he sent me a small, a very small portion of what you had collected from the wicked chieftains. I thought that having undergone such heavy risks for the collection of the arrears, you deserved at least half of it. Hence this trifling gift, and let not *Subudhi* learn what has transpired between us." The king accepted the offer with thanks and handed it over to *Chandrasahasa* who in turn took it to his mother. "How good is the minister!" said he to his mother, "how magnanimous and generous! How different he is from *Subudhi* who had not even the politeness to send us a message of thanks."

Hardly had he uttered the words when a servant entered the room to say that the minister wanted to see *Chandrasahasa*. In response to the request, the prince hurried to the room and seated himself on a stool in front of *Dushtabudhi*. Presently the king went out, and the minister seized the chance to enter into a conversation with the prince.

"You must have found it a hard task, I presume," said the minister with a cunning smile, "to face the chieftains in mutiny. They have been a long time like that and have grown fat at others' expense."

"Not so hard as you think, sir," replied the prince with a note of triumph, "many of them were

quite polite and yielded in the first instance; only a few held out till the end."

"But pray, tell me what cause did they adduce for default, I mean those who yielded in the beginning?" asked the minister.

"Some of them," said the prince, "complained that they had not been sufficiently protected from the oppression of the bigger chieftains."

"And the others?" asked the minister in impatience.

"The others suggested that *Subudhi* had clandestinely instructed them to withhold payment from us."

"Ahem," said the minister, and the youth caught the point.

"There you have it," continued the minister in sly tones, "I have no desire to poison your mind, you are an intelligent youth and may draw such inferences as the suggestions warrant. It is not fair that I should speak against my master."

"But you can speak the truth," added the prince.

"Not to all," answered the cunning man to suggest that he was taking the youth into intimate confidence.

"Yes, I too had some doubts; but, in the thick of the fray," continued the prince, "when harder obstacles were looking us in the face, who could waste time on such thoughts?"

"That is true," said the minister in low tones.

"I felt the whole lot of them were utter scoundrels and therefore, gave no credit to the story."

"Of course, that is the wiser step," added the minister, "let sleeping dogs lie."

There was an insinuation in the tone and accents of the minister which the prince could not mistake.

"If you have any love for us" said the prince rather allured by the enticing words of the wily minister "pray, tell me, sir—and you may tell me anything without fear of disclosure—whether you suspect anything like that of which they complained in the attitude of the king; you need even have no fear that I will proceed to work against the king on the basis of what you say."

"Then I can tell," said the minister conscious of success; "hear me patiently *Chandrasahsa*, and let not a syllable of what I tell you escape from your heart. The charges to which they referred are true."

"Oh! Are they?" interrupted the youth.

"Yes, they are," assured the minister, "and I have positive proof for it. Now hear me. I have served three kings in *Kaunthala* in turn and have read in the books of a hundred more; but none of them has been so weak and treacherous as this cut-purse *Subudhi*. Would you believe me, boy? he

even bribed some of the chieftains not to pay you the arrears”.

“Why?” asked *Chandrasahsa*.

“Yes, that is the point. He wants your father to be killed in battle or turned out of the kingdom and has been very secretly working up for that consummation. Even me, he hates bitterly, but because I have been a minister so long, he spares me in that office.”

“Oh, is it so?” repeated the prince anxious to wreak vengeance on him; “how is it then, minister, that I hear his subjects love him dearly?”

“That is all rubbish, I tell you,” replied the minister suddenly; “that is all manufactured evidence; some of his favourites and accomplices are handsomely paid to proclaim like that. The people of *Kaunthala* are groaning under his rule. No justice is meted out; taxes mount up and vice is rampant; only a few weeks ago, there was an abortive attempt on his life. Fortunately or unfortunately that failed.”

Chandrasahsa was about to put in a question when the minister continued: “But that is not the matter now. We have two questions to consider: One, are you bound to help and let a sovereign reign over you, one who has substantially worked up a silent mutiny against you? Secondly, are you prepared and anxious to save a helpless group of men from the oppression and tyranny of a vicious monarch? Answer me.” *Chandrasahsa* could not say no; he

hesitated for a moment and then replied, "surely *Subudhi* is a vicious king and I am in honour bound to exterminate him; but, let me first institute an enquiry against him, and if the charges are proved, *Subudhi* must go. I shall not hesitate a moment, once he is discovered intolerable; let me try to get at the truth."

"That you can, easily," said the minister, "but if you leave it in other hands, there is great danger."

"No, I shall myself go to *Kaunthala* incognito and make enquiries."

"Yes, that is the best way, my boy. *Madana* my son, is now at *Kaunthala*, I shall give you a letter of introduction to him; he will put you in the way," replied the scheming minister.

CHAPTER-VII

THE ARRANGING OF A MARRIAGE

A couple of days had passed since *Chandrahassa* left the palace in search of *Madana*, to verify by personal enquiries what the minister had so cunningly put in his mind. There was, therefore, nothing more to be done in *Chandanavati*. He was already in the winning tide. At least, so the minister thought as he bade good-bye to the king and the queen and mounted his horse to go to the palace of *Prahastha* in pursuit of an important match that he had been arranging for his daughter; his heart was in high glee; his plots had taken deep root. Nothing now stood in his way. The glittering prize of three

kingdoms passed before his mind's eye. So high did his ambitions soar that long before he could recount all his wiles he found himself in front of the gate of *Prahastha's* palace. Pulling up the reins of his horse he dismounted and knocked at the door. The door opened and as he entered the court-yard, there came down the sickly chieftain, old before his time, to greet him with the enquiry, "how is *Vishaya*? Has she consented?" That was the first question that he put because that was uppermost in his mind. "She is quite well," answered the minister, "but why are you worried over her consent? She is bound to abide by what I fix upon. What otherwise is the meaning of my being her father? She is already eighteen and her marriage can no more be stayed." "But on what grounds does she withhold her consent?" asked *Prahastha*, looking into his mirror admiring, like Narcissus, his own beauty, "I am not so old as she imagines; my eldest son has just completed his tenth year and he was born to me when I was twenty."

There was not the suggestion of a doubt in his tone nor a change in his expression though in reality his wife begot him his first-born at the age of thirty-one, and he was now full sixteen years of age. In appearance *Prahastha* was slightly above fifty. He was short in stature, bent double, crooked and thin; he had a squint in the right eye, his cheeks were sunken and many of his teeth missing. He himself could not deny that his nose was queer, for it bent and stretched so long as if it wanted to

meet his wandering front teeth. One great pride he had; his hair was black and his moustache bushy though stunted in the middle by his projecting nose.

"One thing I tell you," said *Prahastha* emphatically, "I won't do anything that we talked of unless she is made mine. Till then I won't raise a little finger to further your cause and promote your prosperity. What is it to me if you are crowned king of *Kaunthala*, of *Kerala*, and of *Chandanavati*? I must have something substantial in return. Is a young girl too much?"

"Why should you doubt me when I have promised you her hand? I am not going to cater to the desires of a naughty girl. She may have her own fancies, but shall I take cognisance of them? Tomorrow, she may take a fancy for a low caste fellow, just because he looks a little young. Am I then to dance to her tune? Chi! I swear that you shall have her whatever the predilections of the girl may be. But, remember your promise to me. You shall secure me the help of the *Pandavas* and see that I am placed on the throne of *Kaunthala*."

"That I shall or else let lightning strike me down or the Goddess of earth swallow me," said *Prahastha*.

"Swear then," said the minister being afraid that the fellow might forget his promise after the marriage. They placed their palms together and

pledged their word. In the minister's mind, at least, there was no deceit; his part of the contract he meant to fulfil to the letter. As for his daughter's prejudices, he cast them to the four winds.

"Within a month from now we shall celebrate the marriage, shall we not?" said the minister. "It is better not to postpone things."

"I am ready even today," replied *Prahastha*, "for me there is so little to prepare. Only, you must bring round your daughter."

"That I shall, you may depend upon it. If I am her father, she will be yours within a month."

"But why a month?" questioned *Prahastha*, with deep misgivings in his mind that between then and now, unforeseen developments might arise blasting his chances.

"That is necessary, my wife regulates her doings by reference to the stars. She is superstitious in that way. This month is not auspicious for happy alliances and they say that unions contracted during this ominous month end in misery or in premature death."

"Can't you persuade her?"

"Oh, no: She is adamant and would not change her mind."

"How then, you weak man, do you look longingly on three kingdoms? How do you hope to control the ways and doings of a million men when

you can't force your way even with your wedded wife? Shame! My wife, I tell you, was different. When I said anything, had she disagreed I would have strangled her."

"Why are you in a hurry? When you have waited so long, can't you possess your soul in patience a month more?"

"Yes, I suppose I can, that I can," replied *Prahastha* resignedly; "however, write a letter to *Kaunthala* to say that the marriage has been settled and that elaborate preparations must be begun early."

The minister did not hesitate. He sat down and wrote a short note:—

PRAHASTHA'S PALACE

My Dear *Madana*,

May the Goddess of Plenty smile on you. You will be glad to know that *Vishaya's* marriage has been arranged. It is an excellent match. *Prahastha* is not a trifling chieftain; should you estimate his wealth or power or ability he is a shade better than the king of *Kaunthala*. He has also promised us help of which I shall tell you in person. *Vishaya* may not like it much but proceed without informing her. When I go there a month hence, I shall win her round. There is much to gain, nothing to lose.

Your loving father,
DUSHTABUDHI

Part of the letter he read out to *Prahastha* who nodded his head in appreciation of what the minister wrote. The letter was handed over to a messenger

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who promptly took it to *Kaunthala*. He was instructed not to halt anywhere on the way but to go directly to the minister's palace and place it in the hands of *Madana*.

When the servant reached *Kaunthala*, it was dark night. "Here is a letter for *Madana*," said he after knocking at the gate, "this is from the minister."

"*Madana* is not here," said the gate-keeper, "he left the palace two days ago on a gambling enterprise and may be back tomorrow evening, but there is no certainty."

"Then hand the letter over to anyone in the house," said the servant and departed.

"What is the matter?" asked *Vishaya* overhearing the conversation from her room in the balcony. That night she did not go to bed as early as usual. A strange disquietude was annoying her heart; she did not know why. "Who goes there so late in the night?" she questioned the gate-keeper.

"He is a messenger, madam," said the gate-keeper, "he has brought a letter addressed to *Madana* from the minister." As he said this, he walked up the staircase to hand the letter over to *Vishaya*. She looked at the cover and was satisfied that it was her father's hand-writing. She inquisitively turned it this way and that, anxious to know what it might contain. At the same time, uncommon misgivings troubled her heart. "I am his sister and we are one. What is joy to him is joy to me. His sorrow is my

sorrow. He can have no secret to hide from me." So saying, she opened the cover and held the letter before the glimmering bedroom lamp. Quickly her eyes glanced through the first few lines and then she had no courage to read on. The letter trembled in her hands and fell down. Her heart beat fast and drops of sweat stood on her brow. "Woe is me to have been born!" she exclaimed in low tones and could not continue against the rising tide of feelings. She was overwhelmed by them and fell into a swoon.

As she came back to her senses she consoled herself that the whole thing was a dream. But it was a very real thing that was lying on the ground. She took it once again and re-read the contents down to the end. Different interpretations she attempted to put on the letter but it could bear none except the obvious. Then with a courage generally not seen in women, "come what may," said she in her heart, "I can't bear the sight of it," and as she muttered these words, she tore the letter into tiny pieces and burnt them to ashes in the fire.

"Marry him! that is impossible," thought she, "I would rather die than be the wife of that loathsome creature." She had seen him a year ago in her palace talking quietly to her father. His ghastly look and ugly appearance haunted her. The more she thought of him, the sterner grew her resolve; and from the strength of her determination she

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drew increasing courage. The morning dawned and still she was stern. The secret of the letter she stored within her heart. She moved about as if nothing had happened, though within her flamed a furnace that could consume a world.

CHAPTER-VIII

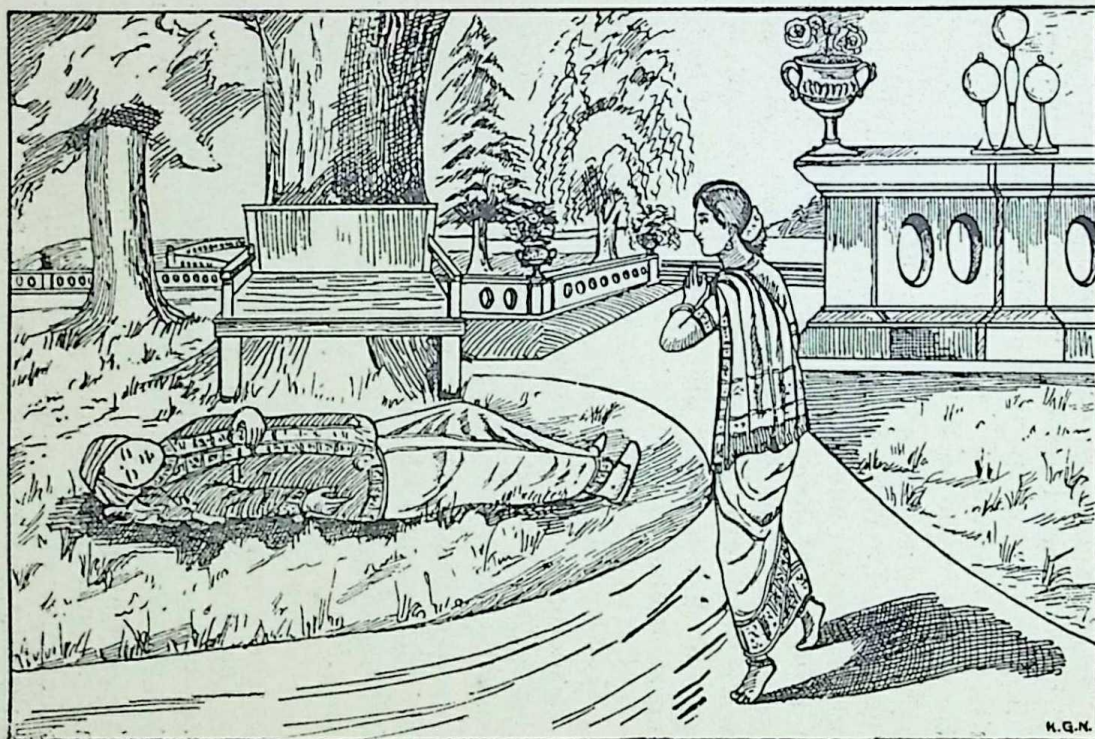
THE FATAL LETTER

“Ha! what a glorious vision greets my eyes! What unrivalled beauty of features! What grace is seated on his brow! How red are his lips!” In this strain did *Vishaya* apostrophise as she approached the young man sleeping soundly on the grass, under a shady tree in the park. She had gone there on an evening stroll along with her dear friend *Champakavalli*, the king’s daughter. Only a little time ago the latter had left her, to pursue the roaming stag in the park, while she herself had come here plucking the sephalika flowers to weave them into a garland. Soon they had to meet again in another part of the wide park, but how could she so quickly leave this heavenly sight? It had in a moment forged links of love round her virgin heart. She started back lest any prying eyes should catch her, but her feet refused to move. She tried to pace back while her heart moved forward. “Who can this stranger be?” she murmured to herself, “he lies there like an angel newly lighted on earth.

"A combination and a form indeed
Where every God did seem to set his seal,
To give the world assurance of a man."

I will go near him; the yearnings of my heart prompt me." She looked around to satisfy herself that none was watching. Gently she paced a few steps forward to catch a nearer glimpse of his moon-like face, at the same time afraid lest the twitter of the singing bird or the skipping of the grass-hopper disturbed by her movement, should rouse him from sleep. That would be a situation most awkward indeed. Was she not just eighteen and if she were seen in the company of an entire stranger all alone, would not a slanderous story be woven round it? She hesitated, but the magnetic charm of the sleeping form was irresistible. Slowly she walked forward, holding her breath lest the motion of the air should give him the message of her coming.

"Ha! he moves. Shall I walk off as if unmindful of his presence?" she thought as the young man turned on to his right side. "No! he has again fallen into deep sleep; see the rhythmic time of his breathing. Perhaps, it is his breath that fills the air with sweet fragrance." She walked on up to where he lay, and looked at him once more, and as she turned aside to see if any one were there, her glance fell on a garment that hung from a bough. In the pocket was a letter. 'Could this letter reveal the name of the man?' She stood on tip-toe and peered into the opening of the pocket. It was like her father's hand-writing. She looked again and fear seized her.



Ha! what a glorious vision greets my eyes!

"Is he likely to rise up from his sleep at once? No," she comforted herself; "he snores," and persuading herself to hope that nothing would happen amiss, she stretched her trembling hands to take the letter out from the pocket.

Now there was no mistaking. It was her father's hand. It was a letter addressed to her brother. She wondered who this youth could be. No harm would happen should she read it. That was certain. She moved away a little, and sat down tremblingly to open the cover. Her quivering hands did it with the greatest care. This is what she found in it :

CHANDANAVATI

My Dear Madana,

Greetings : The messenger who brings you this letter is *Chandrahasa*. He is my *sathru*. Don't enquire into his antecedents, and let no consideration of position or wealth or personnel weigh with you. Give him *visham* at once. It would immediately bring success to my schemes and prosperity to our family."

Yours affectionately,

DUSHTABUDHI

That was all. It was a cryptic letter full of treacherous intentions on a guiltless life. "Oh irony of fate," she exclaimed overcome, "how in his transparent goodness, carrying his doom in his hands, could he have done anything to deserve this at the hands of my father? No, that is impossible. Can guilty persons sleep as soundly as he does? No,

look at his lips and his face cheerful even in the forgetfulness of sleep. Do they not belie his suspicions?" She stood up and walked to him to catch again a glimpse of his face, and was thrice confirmed of his guiltlessness.

"At any cost I must save him from this treacherous plot. My father's sin may be visited on me. Nay, if I hush this up, I am a party to his murder." That was her determination.

"But how?" she asked herself, "If I destroy this letter he might return to my father and get another of the same import."

At once an idea struck her and her eyes flashed with intelligence. Down she stooped to pluck out the stem of a grass, and gathering a little ink from her eyes, which she mixed in the juice of a watery plant, she dipped the stem in the dye and made some corrections in the letter. She read and re-read her corrections, and her countenance shone with delight and joy at the prospect of the illimitable happiness that she had woven out of this treacherous plot.

No sooner had she put back the letter in his pocket than *Chandrasahsa* stirred from sleep. He had been long lying there in weariness; he had been searching for *Madana* for two whole days and had not been able to find him. That day *Madana* was expected to be back in *Kaunthala*, and that was why *Chandrasahsa* had given up his search in the neighbouring places and had come back. On his way,

he had seen the park whose enchanting beauty invited him in. The flowers of the spring, the warbling of the birds, the humming of the honeybees, and the flow of the gushing fountains had hushed him into a sweet and refreshing sleep.

When he awoke the sight was even more glorious. It looked like a divine apparition moving before his eyes. He thought that she was the fairy of the forest and would not speak. He stood there, like a pillar rooted to the ground, gazing at her beauty still, but his heart moved fast alongside of her. He uttered some words to beckon her to stay. She would not. She moved off like a sunlit cloud casting on him a last lingering glance which provoked in his juvenile mind a thousand happy thoughts.

CHAPTER-IX

VISHAYA'S RIVAL

“Why is it that yesterday in the park you did not come back to us with the flowers that you gathered? We waited and waited for you, and not seeing you for a long time, we went round to the bushy corners lest we should miss you. Night fell and still you were not to be seen. So we had to return without you.” To these words of *Champakavalli*, *Vishaya* had come prepared with an answer. She knew that the moment she entered the palace of her dear friend, this would be her question. Readily therefore did her answer come.

"Oh, I had a sudden pain, so I did not like to trouble you. I hurried home."

"And now you are well, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am," replied *Vishaya*.

"Still you look a little pale, like one forlorn."

"That is the result of a serious illness. Others too remark that I look a little faded," said *Vishaya*, "but pray why do you look so uneasy and worn out?"

"Since yesterday," replied the princess, "I have been like that. I do not know why; I have lost all my mirth, foregone all exercise, indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition that life appears to me like an insane sandheap." "That is because you are not married," said *Vishaya* in joke. "Mothers say that unless girls find their husbands in their teens, they develop in their system a new humour which works disaster." She had no more time to stay, so departed, highly satisfied with the way in which she had hood-winked her friend.

When she was gone, *Champakvalli* leaned again on her pillow heaving sighs of sorrow.

"Why is it you sit so lonely? This brooding will ruin your health. Tell me what ails you and if anything can be done be assured that I will do it for you." The old woman said these words in a tone that imparted to the princess new faith and confidence in her servant. She called her near and asking her to sit beside her on her bed, began, "whatever happens don't reveal to anyone the facts that I tell you."

My father will kill me if he comes to know anything of this that troubles my heart. If, to seek solace I tell this to my mother, then woe is me; for, it would be carried to the king at once."

"Tell me, my daughter, have trust in me," said the old woman; "have you ever known a secret gone out from me? So many things have taken place in the palace, of which I have told you nothing in spite of our intimacy. You may rest assured that whatever is told me is kept in a sealed book."

The tone and accents of the old woman were quite assuring; so the princess took courage and began to relate her woe.

"Yesterday, you remember, we went to the park in the evening, myself and *Vishaya*. After a brief conversation we parted company. She went to gather flowers and I, in pursuit of the stag. For more than half an hour I followed the roaming deer and got tired. But *Vishaya* did not come. Perhaps, she had not finished plucking the sephalika flowers. Having gone to the park together I wanted also to return together, so I started out to find her. I walked and walked, still she was nowhere. But when I had gone far into the park away from the gate, my eyes fell on a young man standing erect and muttering with his lips as if he were praying to God. He looked steadily in one direction beckoning, perhaps, to a far-off antelope and I could distinctly see one side of his face reflect-

ing the golden rays of the evening sun. Oh, what matchless beauty ! In him nature has been utterly prodigal. No tongue can describe the beauty of his form or the charm of his face ! Suddenly I felt a thrill such as I have never before experienced. The picture that he makes is always before my eyes. It rises before me at every turn, sleeping or waking. Oh ! tell me what it all means and what the end of it will be."

The old woman heard the tale patiently and put on a smile, conscious as she was of the longings of juvenile love. But now like one philosophically detached from such yearnings she said assuringly, "it is nothing, my daughter, but a girl's love for a young man. It is a passing phase of life. You are in your teens and life is a sandy desert without such feelings. I shall move in this matter and persuade the king to expedite your marriage. He is hesitating far too much. Whoever it be, a husband must be secured. How easily men and women forget their past and ignore the feelings of a youthful girl !"

"What did you say?" asked the princess, "I need no husband if he be any other than that young man. I have woven him round my maiden heart. I must marry him or none."

"So have we all felt and said at one time or another," replied the old woman jestingly. "It is still green in my memory how obstinately I stood out as you to marry a handsome youth who had

captivated my heart. But my father pointedly refused his consent as we belonged to a higher caste. And what happened? Against my will, he gave me in marriage to a fellow for whom I had at first no love. Oh! how I felt the pangs of unrealised love! For many a day I went on weeping and fasting and praying. But as days wore on, the picture of the man faded from my memory and then I gradually began to love my husband. Since then, I think we have been dear to each other as any other couple. When the first flush wears off, the scruples of love cease to worry you. That, at least, has been my experience and the experience of several others."

To this, the princess' reply was short. "That may have been your case. As for me, I will never consent to marry another."

"All right," replied the woman, "I shall enquire into the accomplishments and ancestry of the man to whom you referred. Perhaps, he may be the youth who has been going up and down the streets of *Kaunthala*, a young man on horse-back in search of the minister's son. He, they say, is very handsome."

CHAPTER-X

A FAMILIAR FACE

"Has any one of you noted a strange young man passing through the streets of our city?" enquired a woman of her friends who had gathered round a well one evening to gossip.

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"Yes, I have," replied another, "I myself wanted to ask you about him. His face seems to be familiar, but I can't recollect when and where I have seen him."

"Exactly," replied the first, "when next I see him passing I shall stop him at my house and enquire."

Early next morning the same young man was seen riding through the same street.

"Pray, will you kindly stop here for a while? I wish to ask you some questions," said a woman stepping out into the road and standing in his way. To *Chandrasahsa* it was a most unexpected call. "Who is this woman," he wondered, "who takes such liberty with me?" He was, however, too courteous to brush aside the request of an elderly woman. He pulled up the reins, and dismounting from the horse sat on the threshold impatient to go to the minister's palace. As he sat there, in a moment he found himself surrounded by a multitude of faces, all, past prime and some, with wrinkles. They looked at him steadily trying to relate his face to one they had seen before. The clear outline of that face played in their memory still; like the philosophers' stone, his identity evaded them.

"I say," broke out one of them, "does he not look like the old beggar-woman's son?" The hint was more than enough. "Exactly," cried they all in one voice, and came closer round him. By this time the crowd was surging up, all anxious to catch a glimpse of his face.

"There is no doubt who he is," remarked many, though in the midst were a few who still doubted and argued.

"I shall decide," said an old woman impatiently making herself heard in that babel of tongues. "If I see, and certify, you may rest assured." Her age was enough to get her a hearing; she had also undergone many bitter experiences of life which earned for her the sympathy of her neighbours. She came from the outer rings, and standing in front of the youth, asked him in faltering tones, "will you kindly lift up your right arm?"

Chandrahassa did not hesitate. He lifted up both and stood there for a moment like a statue.

"There is no doubt," exclaimed the grandma at once, looking carefully underneath his strong arm. "He is the beggar-woman's son. I am sure of that. See the amulet beneath. That, I noted long ago, when once he came to my house with my son." She was filled with sorrow and could not continue. Tears fell fast, as the remembrance came to her of her son, now no more. How they used to play and quarrel and again become friends—all she recollected as the events of yesterday. She stretched out her feeble hands towards him, and burst out into inexpressible grief.

Then they began to ask him all sorts of questions. "Where were you all these years?" they asked. "What strange events took you out of the city of

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Kaunthala? How sorry we felt when all of a sudden you disappeared."

"Do you remember me?" asked one. "Do you remember my son who used to give you sweets and to play with you?" asked another. As many women as there were so many questions came.

Chandrasahsa was completely at a loss; he remembered nothing of all that they related. A hazy remembrance lingered in his mind of a forest in which a cruel soldier had cut off one of his toes. To that he referred, and pointed to the spot on the right foot from which the extra toe had been cut.

"Then there is no doubt about his identity," exclaimed many of the women looking down at his foot. "We now remember so well how we used to tease him; how he had eleven while all else had but ten toes on their feet, and how with witty retorts he used to drive us into peals of laughter."

"Can you recollect," asked one of them, "an old crone who used to carry you on her shoulders, begging for alms?"

"I cannot say that I remember any such. The indistinct figure of a woman lurks in my mind but I can't, in the least, recall her features."

In the meantime a rich lady who had stolen away from the group came back to invite him for breakfast. "It is not polite to refuse the invitation," thought *Chandrasahsa*, "especially in view of the

strange stories which the old mothers tell. If I lived on their hospitality, when I was a child, and helpless, it would be bitter ungratefulness now to refuse their invitation." So he consented and followed her to her house with the talkative group of women behind. As he sat for his meal they worried him with many questions. One amongst them was more curious than all others. "Are you married?" was her query. Behind her question there was evidently a latent motive which her neighbours easily read. It could have only one meaning, and that, her unmarried daughter supplied.

CHAPTER-XI

DEEP DISAPPOINTMENT AND AFTER

It was a night of full moon; the clouds dispersed from the east as the Queen of night came up from her slumber, glorious like a dream. In the clear light of her beams did mad men dance, and lovers flirt, and poets sing. The barking of the dogs jarred the music of the rustling leaves and of the winds that came as through a flute from the fields of paddy.

It was on this night that *Chandrasahsa* had been asked to meet *Vishaya* in the garden. A message had come to him from her through a serving-maid, a message that filled him with hopes.

DUSHTABUDHI'S PALACE

My lord,

When you beckoned me to stop in the park, I did not stay for fear of being watched by others.

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If I walked off then, it was to meet you in a more convenient place, at a more convenient time and for a fuller interview. Next full moon, I will go to the garden of my father, the minister at nine o'clock. There let us meet to be happy.

With great hopes :

Your servant,

VISHAYA

The time mentioned was nine o'clock but to be on the safe side *Chandrasahsa* started at seven. The garden was only a few yards from the inn where he was lodging in expectation of *Madana*. Yet, it seemed to him an immeasurable distance away. And as he reached the place he wondered at the beauty of the spot which his lady-love had chosen for their meeting. "Ha! what a splendid sight!" he exclaimed. "Man has here vied with nature to embellish the earth." He could not continue in this poetic strain; his mind was busy with something else. He thought of the curly hair that flowed from her head like the blue waters of the Jumna; of her slender hands smooth as alabaster; of her queenly and majestic gait as of a caparisoned elephant. All this he might forget, but not that inviting look, which like a dart had pierced his heart.

Time passed slowly and would not move to nine o'clock. He walked to and fro in silent mutterings, enjoying before-hand the sweetness of her company. Often he halted to fix his wandering thoughts on her enchanting look, and again he walked. The rustling

of the leaves teased him frequently with the suggestion of her coming. At last, it was nine o'clock. Now she would come, and lo ! there was the chirping of the birds at a distance and the moving of the leaves. They were the heralds of her silent coming. He walked up to greet her as at a distance, he saw her moving with the majesty of a queen. White was her garment and her hair black. At the sight of it his heart was on tip-toe, his pulse beat fast, he stood there still, breathing deep. "Let her come up and then will I embrace her," he thought, stretching out his arms in a circle. He waited and waited but she did not come near. "Perhaps, she wants me to go there," thought he, and walked up to where she stood.

As he approached he was deceived. He saw only a white patch of light interspersed with black. Out of it his fevered imagination had conjured up her queenly form. He stood there dumb-founded waiting for her coming. Perhaps, she was on another side, so he walked on to search her out. Time was flying fast now. It was already ten ; still she did not come. And soon it was eleven and yet no sign of her coming. Hope fled and despair slowly crept on, "why am I deceived ?" he now asked himself. "Has she forgotten the engagement or as any one played me false ? No, that cannot be. The reference to our meeting in the park and to my beckoning leave any such doubt out of the question. The message is surely hers, there is no doubt. Different explanations came to his mind but none satisfactory.

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The moon now stood at the zenith of her glory illuminating his faded face. She stood there awhile, laughing over his madness, and then moved on. No longer could he wait there. Anger and hatred and agony all seized him at the same moment. He did not know whom he ought to blame, and had not even the strength of mind to curse the woman who was the cause of his disappointment.

He returned to the inn a wiser and sadder youth. He cast his eyes steadily and long on the ground, hesitating to lift them up. The sadness that descended on him and the change in his countenance were obvious—The bloom in his face was gone in a day. People who had previously noted him observed the change, and ascribed it to the failure of the mission on which he appeared to have come. But there was one woman in *Kaunthala* more inquisitive than all others.

“Nothing like getting things at their source,” thought she, and one day, when he was going to the inn, eyes downcast, she intercepted him. He stopped at her house, and as he sat on a bench in the front verandah the conversation began:

“Have you not seen *Madana* yet?” asked the woman.

“No, not yet.”

“*Madana* is always like that. You can hardly ever see him in his house. If the minister is in, he dare not stir out; otherwise he cares not to stay in. That is why his mother insists that he should

be married, and they are searching out a young bride for him."

"Let them look out for a bride; young or old, it matters not to me. It is now nearly two weeks since I came here and I am anxious to go back to *Chandanavati*. Every day the servants repeat that he will be coming the next evening. How long shall I wait like this? My parents are alone and will be anxious that I should return soon."

"Perhaps, that is what vexes you so much, for vexed you evidently appear to be," remarked the woman. "Who would not be troubled by the extraordinary delay that *Madana* makes to return home? Who would not be tired and irritated by having to stay idle in a foreign place walking up and down waiting for a man who never comes? That is really annoying, and that annoyance causes the depression that sits in your face. Is it not so?" asked the woman inquisitively.

"Partly," answered the youth anxious to divert the talk into other directions, and displeased to learn that his face suggested the agony of his mind. The cunning woman wanted to find out precisely what the other part was and therefore, herself added suddenly the continuation of his reply, "and partly?" The young man did not catch up her words; he remained silent. But the woman would not leave him there; she repeated again, "and partly?" To this *Chandrahassa* replied, "there are some other reasons too."

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"Which, perhaps, you won't tell me," completed the sly woman. "But what else could trouble the heart of a young man like you?"

To this question *Chandrasahsa* would not give a reply. That would disclose a story most painful to remember. But assurances came quickly from the woman. "You need not be afraid that any of the facts you reveal will go beyond me. I have lived these fifty-five years and not a single person has at any time brought against me a charge of that sort." Her tone and expression were so assuring, and at the same time the thought of the deep disappointment was so tormenting, that much against his will the young man began to relate the story of his sorrow.

"A few days ago, when I was returning to *Kaunthala*, I saw a beautiful park on the confines of the city. After the incessant wanderings into the villages of the immediate vicinity, in search of *Madana*, I was so tired that I went to the park and sat down to rest a while. Suddenly I fell asleep and on waking there moved before me a most beautiful woman. I called her to stay but she would not. Her face, form and gait were fascinating, and more than all that, her look so enchanting that my heart irretrievably went out to her. The very next day an old woman placed in my hands a message from a girl named *Vishaya*."

"*Vishaya*!" repeated the woman and nodded her head.

“In the note reference was made to the previous meeting in the park. The message asked me to meet her in her father's park at nine o'clock on the last full moon night. I had no reason to doubt the authenticity of the letter, and according to its instructions I went there in good time. What was my disappointment when I found myself deceived? She did not keep her promise. She did not come though I stayed there till the small hours of the morning. It was most cruel and has gone into my heart like a dagger.” He repeated the latter part of his tale like one visibly moved and in sympathy the old woman also changed the expression of her face.

“*Vishaya*, I know her,” she replied in low tones. “What cruelty and insult is this that she has done? But that is nothing new with her. She has been thrice like that, deceiving some very young men. Perhaps, she loves them all. But why should the inconstant girl cheat others? She knows only too well that she cannot marry any one of them. Her father, the minister, would never consent to it. He has fixed his eyes on another man, a chieftain as I understand. Perhaps, his age and appearance do not suit her fancy. I really pity the girl. But she is also a little haughty and trifles with young men. She changes her fancy as often as she changes her saree.”

“Is that so?” asked *Chandrasahsa* anxious to know more about the girl who had so easily captivated his heart.

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"But why should you go mad over her, I wonder?" said the woman insinuatingly, "as if there were no better or more beautiful girl in *Kaunthala*. If you want I shall acquaint you with a dozen fairer far than she.

I have in mind, however, one specially who would be an embellishment to you. If once you see her, I am certain you would discard *Vishaya* like an old torn cloth. She is just of the same age as *Vishaya* and a little taller. You have only to look at her face to see that it is matchless.

"But is she of such noble birth as *Vishaya*?" asked the impatient youth, wondering if any one could be more beautiful than she.

"Of course," replied the woman with emphasis. "Deep blue blood runs in her veins. *Vishaya* is the servant and she is the mistress. *Vishaya's* father is the minister and serves the king; her father is the king himself."

This piece of news did not raise in his heart any new hopes. The first question was whether she would be as enchanting and lovely as *Vishaya*. If she were, would she condescend to marry him, a man of doubtful ancestry, who, as he had lately been informed, was once a beggar boy?

"You say," began he, "that her father is the king of *Kaunthala*, and that she is his only child. How then can you imagine that she would stoop

to be my wife, and even if she were willing, that her father would consent to the marriage?"

"But that is a different matter, the consideration of which may be deferred," said the woman. "I may give you a hint. I heard her one day saying that in the park just on the outskirts of the city, she saw you standing motionless without your seeing her, and I have often heard her refer to you in such superlative terms, that the affair need not be dismissed as out of the bounds of the possible."

How she could have seen him was now his difficulty. For all that he knew, only *Vishaya* and himself were together on that side of the park. It seemed to him that he was moving in an enchanted world to the tune of the fairies. Having been stimulated so far his next question was how he could proceed in the affair.

"That is the only point that matters," said the woman. First you two must meet together for which I shall arrange and after that we shall take counsel."

CHAPTER-XII

A HASTY PROMISE

"Ah! the success of my plans is assured! If once they meet things will work out for themselves, and end in triumph. It may cause disappointment and sorrow to *Vishaya*, but I can't help it. If she succeeds, the princess would die of grief or drown

herself. One or the other must suffer. It is most unfortunate that these two shining moons are destined to move in the self-same orb: In a clash, of course, the greater must win. My mistress is the princess and she has the divine right of the first choice. The minister's daughter must be content with what her superior discards.

But will *Champakavalli* refuse him? No. There is such beauty in his face that he turns old women young. He is a *Kshatriya* by birth; there is no doubt about that. Ha! how handsome are his features, and his talk how pleasing.

The princess must thank her stars for putting *Vishaya's* letter into my hands. That is the only service that she, my sister, has done for me so far. It does not matter that she has betrayed her mistress. My tampering with the date in the letter has gone splendidly well and has borne its fruit. May the stars of the princess ascend till the fruits that are in sight ripen to the full!"

Thus the old woman soliloquised in subdued tones as *Chandrasah* left her house. Every moment was full of possibilities. If by accident the truth came out, and *Vishaya* happened to meet him anywhere, it would be most disastrous. Even otherwise, if she could inform the princess, a moment earlier, about her cheerful prospect, that would mean so much relief to her mistress. Soon therefore, she hastened to the palace and stood before *Champakavalli* with a beaming smile.

"What is the matter?" asked the princess, groaning with sorrow. "I am woebegone and nothing can wipe out from my memory the princely figure that stood in the park." Her voice was trembling and her look heart-rending.

"Why should you worry yourself over the things which you have committed to me? As I promised you I have made enquiries. I saw the young man myself. Really his is the most beautiful face that I have seen. He looks so handsome that I am not in the least surprised that young girls are easily fascinated by him."

"Girls, did you say?" interrupted the princess.

"Yes, girls."

"Who else besides myself?"

"There is another who is as mad as you."

"Who?" asked the princess in impatience.

"Would you believe it?" said the woman. "She is none other than *Vishaya*, your dearest friend. She is no doubt more clever than you. See how cunningly she told you a lie to explain away the reason why she left the park without you. Since then she has been vigorously scheming to get at him."

"Has she succeeded?" asked the princess in an agonised tone.

"Fortunately for you, she missed the mark. She would have succeeded splendidly had not her letter fallen into my hands."

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“And now?” continued the princess.

“And now that young man—*Chandrasahsa* is his name—is to meet you in the garden this night.”

“*Chandrasahsa!*” the princess uttered the name twice. “What charm is in that word, what melody of sound !

“What preparation shall I make to meet my lord when he comes?” asked she without any hesitation to address him as lord. Nature and up-bringing had made her an optimist.

Her room in the tower, in the garden east of the palace, was the place fixed upon for the meeting. She herself decorated it most neatly and tastefully. The trimming of the creepers, the clearing of the avenues, and the watering of the plants were left to other women though she kept a supervising eye over all. By night-fall everything was ready. She was thoroughly satisfied with the decoration of her room and the attractive appearance of the garden. Only one thing was wanting to complete her bliss and that was the coming of her lord, *Chandrasahsa*.

Leaving the old woman *Chandrasahsa* was lost in a labyrinth of thought. From beginning to end, everything seemed to be enveloped in mystery. With his heart torn between the two young girls he did not know what to do. Though he could not discover absolute identity, there was evidently a close resemblance between the woman who delivered him the message from *Vishaya* and the woman who

arranged for the interview with the princess. Was there any plot interwoven through these movements? Could he, having once had a deep disappointment, willingly bargain again for another? There was *Vishaya* to whom his heart had gone out irretrievably, but she was a cheat and the woman bore witness to it. The other evidently stood much higher than he. She was the princess in the first place; yet, that did not mean that she was beautiful. Besides, would she stoop so low as to take him for a husband? And what about her father's consent? Thoughts like these worried and tormented him till the blue lights from the tower suddenly caught his eyes. So enchanting was the sight before him that for a moment he hesitated to enter the garden.

It was a most beautiful spot. He had seen nothing like it before. The garden was a large circular plot with high walls around. In its centre stood the tower with an imposing dome. Creepers of jasmine grew on it in abundance, sheltering it under the foliage alike from the scorching sun and the bleak winter. Small birds hopped about playing hide and seek under the shade of the leaves. Round the foot of the tower and a few yards away was a grassy ring with seats of marble planted at intervals. Some of them looked towards the tower and some outwards. Around the ring was a vast stretch of green and circular land where plants grew luxuriantly. The *sephalika* flowers grew in abundance upon the slender branches that hung like strings of pearl and coral. The antelopes grazed freely

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without fear of harm: the deer played about like skipping children. Birds that nestled on the tops of the cedar trees sang their melodious song; some perched about thinking it was day.

It was into their midst that *Chandrahasa* had nervously ushered himself when the crescent moon was just peeping above the blue-capped mountains. As he came to the foot of the staircase at the end of one of the avenues, he looked up. It was a glorious vision that greeted him. A tall and slender girl appeared at the door and beckoned him to come up. She appeared like a queen born to rule. *Chandrahasa* grew nervous at the sight of her. Slowly he walked up breathing hard and fast, and as he entered the room, his eyes were dazzled by the blue lights. He seated himself on an ivory chair and she sat beside him. For a moment they did not speak; they were shy. She looked at his face and was thrilled by his beauty. "Ah, how his name and face agree," she thought, "what a wonderful piece of God's work is he! In form and moving how express and admirable, in appearance how like an avatar!"

She inspired him with wonder and awe. Her presence by his side made him feel that he was the woman, so striking was her look, so flashing her eyes, so commanding her bearing. *Vishaya* excelled her in feminine charm, but she was a queen indeed.

They sat there a long time though their words were few and when the night had far advanced and

tired nature had gone to sleep, *Chandrasahasa* rose up to go. *Champakavalli* would not let him go so easily. "Promise me, my lord," she said in low tones, and would not continue. The youth caught from her face and eye, what she really hinted and had no hesitation on his part. Would she be true? That was the first question which tormented him. She was a princess and he, a young man of lower rank; would the king her father seal the marriage with his royal consent? That was most unlikely. There was still another difficulty and that was *Vishaya*. She it was who first enchanted his heart with the tender instincts of love, though later evidence, having convinced him that she was a deceiver, had quenched his youthful ardour. For a time he stood silent, lost in thought, and for the girl standing in front of him, those were the most anxious moments of her life. For her joy and life or sorrow and death hung on his answer.

"Speak, my lord," she repeated, with such a despairing look that *Chandrasahasa* could not resist it.

"Yes," said he in slow tones, unconscious, perhaps, of the implications of his consent. She sank into her seat in restful bliss and after a while they stood up to swear before the holy fire. As they placed their hands on each other's, like the opposite poles of a magnet, the hands clung together under the forces of love that flowed in abundance from each other's heart.



"Promise me, my lord!"

When *Champakavalli* and *Chandrasahsa* were in the room swearing constancy of love to each other, the king and the queen were in another part of the palace finding a suitable husband for their daughter.

"How is it you are sleeping over the matter?" asked the queen. "Don't you realise that next full moon day, she completes her eighteenth year? To leave her to waste the bloom of her life in fancy and dreams invites a curse to descend on the family."

"What shall I do?" replied the king. "I also am very anxious to get her a fitting husband so that we may hand over the state to him. So far, the search has not been fruitful."

"How long, then, are you going to search like this?" asked the queen. "If you can't get her a husband exactly to your liking, you must be satisfied with the next best. If you don't mind I would suggest a name."

"Whose?" asked the king.

"What do you think of *Madana*, our minister's son? He is a handsome youth, and capable too, though not like his father."

"Yes, I too had him in mind but you must know he is not a prince and is too far below our status to become our son-in-law."

"Whom else are you awaiting?" asked the queen annoyed by his indifference.

"My search is for a child, now a youth, of whom I have told you nothing hitherto. Read this letter." So saying he went into his secret chamber and brought out a silver box. Inside was a letter which the queen took and began to read.

"From

Suddharmika, the Most Exalted King of Kerala.

To

His Most Excellent Majesty Subudhi,

The King of Kaunthala.

Salutations and greetings to your August Honour. May the Goddess of Plenty and Prosperity smile on you ever lastingly.

My palace is surrounded by a huge army of soldiers. There is no chance of escape. When I am gone and my wife, too, keep a kindly eye on my child. God hath ordained him for great things. The amulet on his arm shall help you to identify him."

Consider this my supplication with courtesy.

Your Ally,
Suddharmika."

"So you consider *Suddharmika's* child to be still alive?" said the queen looking at the letter. "You are, I think, living in a fool's paradise. There

is absolutely no chance of the boy's survival. Nearly twenty years have passed since the good *Suddhar-mika* died and his queen entered the funeral pyre with him, and nothing has been heard of the child since then. I am told that a search has been instituted by the wicked general to discover the boy and who knows what has come of it? Of course, Ijtoo feel that the *Kerala* prince would be a matchless husband for her but what is the use of our waiting for a youth of whose existence on earth we are so uncertain? Abandon all such ideas; they are merely a wish. Come down to facts and living beings. We shall have *Madana*; what do you say to that?"

The king had not much enthusiasm for the candidate whose claims the queen had so stoutly championed. In the first place, he was not of royal blood. Secondly, he had none of the father's cleverness. Were he given the hand of the princess the kingdom also would be his. Woe then to his subjects! Above all, gambling was the ruling passion of his life, and who knew if he would not gamble away the whole kingdom? These were all serious considerations.

"In any case," said he, "we shall come into more intimate contact with him; let him stay in the palace for a few days; we shall watch his movements and study him closely before committing ourselves."

"Yes," said the queen evidently pleased with the success of her persuasion.

“But keep this a secret unknown to any.”

“Certainly I will,” said the queen going out of his presence, her mind full of great expectations.

Privately she called for a servant and sent him to search for *Madana*. “Go out into the neighbouring districts and lead him back into his house. Let him not know that it was I who sent you searching. When he is brought, inform me at once and then I shall tell you the purpose of my mind.” The servant easily understood what was at the back of it all, and sped forth from the palace in search of *Madana*, hoping that, with the consummation of the marriage, gifts would come to him from both the parties.

CHAPTER-XIV

VISHAYA SUCCEEDS

Three weeks had passed since *Chandrasahasa* had come to *Kaunthala* and he almost despaired of seeing *Madana*. He often thought of going back to *Chandanavati* anxious to see his parents from whom he had never stayed away so long. But unforeseen events that had happened since his coming to *Kaunthala* kept him back. The picture of *Vishaya* imprinted on his heart, the promise to the princess, and the strange stories related by the crones, perplexed him. How long was he to stay there? At last one night he made up his mind to return to *Chandanavati* and hand over the letter to the minister.

Accordingly the next morning, when the sun was just peering above the snow-clad mountains, *Chandrasahsa* saddled his horse and was riding fast back to *Chandanavati*. A multitude of thoughts worked in his mind causing misery and anxiety. But when at a distance he espied a handsome youth riding towards *Kaunthala*, all these thoughts flitted away. Who could this be ?

He looked like the leader of a gang for behind him rode a large retinue of followers. They were evidently in a merry mood and were talking in loud tones that suggested a victory. Alongside of the youth came one who appeared to be a servant. His was a face which *Chandrasahsa* remembered to have seen in *Kaunthala*. When and where he could not exactly recollect. The youth and the servant talked in low tones, apparently anxious that none should overhear them.

Though *Chandrasahsa* noted the coming of the party, he did not stop; he eyed them indifferently and rode past. When he had gone a little further on, he dismounted for rest and sat on a stone bridge. Just then an old man was walking across. "Pray, old man," he cried, "can you tell me who that youth was riding along this road, just a few minutes ago ?"

"Who calls me old ?" retorted the angry traveller, coming closer to the bridge to scrutinise the features of the impertinent youth whose face appeared to him hazy from a few yards off. "These rascally

rogues, they all call me old. I am not half as aged as you imagine ! My hair is grey ; otherwise I am quite young. If anything, I am a few months younger than *Prahastha*. But, fortunate man, he has won a girl at last, while I have been so long hunting for one in vain. I am stronger than he and healthier but he is more cunning than I. Somehow, he has captivated the minister who prefers to give his daughter in marriage to him rather than to me."

Chandrahassa heard the complaint and was very sorry that an old man was after the minister's daughter ; what the servant of the princess had related to him in her house agreed with this. His heart grew sick and he wished to return to save the girl from the old man's hands. But he waited for an answer to his question. " I am sorry, sir," he confessed, " that I offended you ; I mistook you for an old man. Pray, tell me now, who was that young man ?"

" Don't you know him ? " replied the man surprised at his ignorance. " He is the far-famed *Madana*, the prodigal son of the minister and the brother of the beautiful and lovely damsel to whom I referred just now."

" He, then, is the man for whom I have been searching with this letter," said *Chandrahassa* and started up.

" Ay, ay, stay a little," said the old man anxious to know what the letter contained. He suspected it

might be something dealing with *Vishaya's* wedding.

Chandrasahsa had no time to stay ; he mounted his horse to overtake the minister's son.

" Ask him to wait a little outside," said *Madana* when he was informed that a young man stood in the court-yard wanting to see him. That for three weeks the messenger had been in search of him did not concern him. He was still the indifferent youth that he used to be.

Chandrasahsa sat outside extremely uneasy. He had come there on the minister's persuasion to study at close quarters the nature of the rule which obtained in *Kaunthala*. This was but a letter of introduction. Strange events had overtaken him ; strange thoughts of love had sprung up in his mind. He had given promises of a far-reaching nature ; and the latest piece of news which he got on the wayside from the old man was most distressing. As he sat there musing, *Madana* came out with his company of friends.

" What is it you have brought me from my father ?" asked he carelessly. He was more anxious to enquire into the fortune the prospect of which had already ruined him in the gambling-house.

" Here is the letter," said *Chandrasahsa*, taking it from his pocket and handing it to him. Indifferently, he tore open the letter and read its mysteri-

ous contents. It was a most uncommon letter; he read it over several times to make sure of its meaning.

CHANDANAVATI

My Dear Madana,

Greetings: The messenger who brings you this letter is *Chandrasahsa*. He is my mithru. Don't enquire into his antecedents and let no considerations of position or wealth or personnel weigh with you. Give him *Vishaya* at once. It would immediately bring success to my schemes and prosperity to our family.

Yours affectionately,

DUSHTABUDHI

"Can this be true? Are my eyes abusing their office? There is no doubt that the writing is my father's. Has he lost his sense with advancing years? Or can a mischievous demon have possessed him? To give away *Vishaya*—and when the knot is tied, there is no untying it. To give *Vishaya* to this youth whose antecedents are not known, how is it possible?" thought he, and turning to *Chandrasahsa* he asked,

"Can you tell me from where you got this letter?"

"From *Dushtabudhi*, the minister," answered *Chandrasahsa*.

"Where did my father write this?"

"In the palace of the king of *Chandanavati*."

He had been specially instructed not to enquire into his antecedents. So *Madana* contented himself

by looking at *Chandrasahasa* from head to foot. There was no doubt in his mind that the messenger who brought the letter had a worthy lineage.

In his face was the grace and courage of a Kshatriya prince. Perhaps, alliance with him would bring happy results as his father had written. To ignore the letter of whose genuineness he had not even the shadow of a doubt, might cause his family misfortune, for which he alone would be held responsible. Therefore *Madana* thought that it was the better part of wisdom to bow to the dictates of his father who had so expressly directed him to give *Vishaya* at once.

Asking *Chandrasahasa* to sit on a chair, he went inside and read the letter to his mother.

"What? Is *Vishaya's* marriage settled without my consent? Let me see the youth," said she half in anger, half in expectation, and hurried out to see the young man who had brought the message. As she saw him getting up from his seat in deference to her the expression of her face changed and she thought, "no, my husband is not a fool. What an excellent choice he has made."

"May I know your name?" asked she approaching the charming youth.

"*Chandrasahasa*," mother, replied the young man.

"Ah!" she said to herself, "what an appropriate name—*Chandrasahasa*! How suggestive of his personal beauty! The moon herself has disfiguring spots but his face has none."

“ From where do you come ? ”

“ From *Chandanavati*. ”

She asked a few more questions but none of an inquisitive nature. Inwardly she congratulated herself on the excellence of the choice her husband had made. She had no doubt that *Chandrahassa* was a Kshatriya prince ; and as she was certain that the minister would not set his heart on a match without himself carefully scrutinising the ancestry of the person with whom he proposed to contract kinship, there was no need on her part to make any further enquiries. She asked him to wait outside and slyly beckoning her son in, muttered something into his ear with a happy smile. The marriage was duly arranged.

Vishaya was all the time in the verandah of the room and had caught a glimpse of the vision which in the park had entranced her heart. Optimistic though she was about the success of her schemes she feared strange happenings might upset them.

Through the opening in the window she gazed at the scene below, at the same time chiding her heart for its impatience and lack of control. Suddenly, she heard the foot-steps of her mother ascending the stair-case, and lest she should be caught in a suspicious attitude hastened to her room and seated herself before a book.

“ God hath blessed you, *Vishaya*—,” said the mother ere she reached the top of the stair-case.

"How?" questioned *Vishaya* at once.

"With a handsome youth," was the reply. "You may go down and see him through the window."

"No, I do not want to see what person you choose as a becoming husband for me," she answered in a tone of humility and bashfulness, conscious of the triumph she had scored.

CHAPTER-XV

TWO LOVERS

Dushtabudhi's orders were peremptory. There was no time to wait for the return of the minister. *Vishaya* must be given in marriage forthwith. Nearly three weeks had elapsed since the writing of that letter, and though, so far nothing had happened amiss, *Madana* feared that to wait any longer might bring misfortune. Therefore, he took courage, called *Chandrahasa* inside and asked,

"When shall we celebrate the marriage?"

"Whose do you mean?" asked *Chandrahasa*.

Madana first imagined that the young messenger was joking but his puzzled look induced him to pursue the conversation further.

"*Vishaya's*" replied *Madana*.

"What has that to do with me?" asked *Chandrahasa*, slightly offended that he had been employed to

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carry a message of that sort. The minister had sent him on a different mission, that was what he was given to understand. Secondly, he had a grudge against *Vishaya*. At the same time he was painfully conscious of the deep misery which *Dushtabudhi* was unwittingly preparing for his young daughter. It was a distressing thought. Even in spite of the hesitating promise which he had made to *Champakavalli*, and the tormenting disillusionment in the park of which *Vishaya* was the cause he felt a warm affection for her in his heart. If he could not marry her which evidently they both once desired he had the charity of mind to wish for her, at least, a husband of tolerable beauty and youth. However, he was anxious to leave that topic and pass on to the other things mentioned—he thought there were many things—in the letter, and was about to begin when *Madana* interrupted him and in answer to his question said, “you have everything to do with *Vishaya*’s marriage.”

“What do you mean?” asked the impatient prince somewhat startled.

Madana at once understood that the minister had arranged the marriage in great secrecy and had not even taken *Chandrahasa* into confidence. This was a strong argument for celebrating the marriage at once. To hold back from him the cheerful news was no longer possible since he was the chief person in the affair. Therefore, *Madana* put the letter in the hands of *Chandrahasa* who read through it

with great avidity. Perplexing thoughts confused his mind. *Vishaya's* love for him in the light of later events, was apparently questionable. He could not trust her. There was the princess to whom he had sworn. At the same time he was exceedingly pleased with the minister who had duped him to his own advantage. On the contrary, had he confided to him the real purport of the letter, it would have been all plain and smooth-sailing; he would not then have got into troubled waters. But there was no use brooding over the past; he sat there silent, lost in thought and when *Madana* went out leaving him alone he began to speak in low tones to clarify his own confused mind.

“ Ah, shall I go back on the word which before the Holy Fire I pledged to *Champakavalli*? No, I will not do it. For all the treasures of the world, I will not turn traitor to a woman. I will be constant to her, but if she breaks her word then I have an excuse. Already Dame Rumour has told me through silly gossip, that the king has chosen *Madana* for his son-in-law, and should she consent, I have a means to extricate myself from my promise.

Then, shall I fix my affections again on *Vishaya*? But who shall place any trust in her? Her fancy changes as often as she meets young men; so goes the report. Still, I shall weave my heart round hers, so that as days go by the latent love of which her look in the park was the suggestion, shall make itself manifest.

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Ah ! the good minister ! Had he been more frank I would have been spared all this agony. I shall mark time and watch the developments; till then—”

Suddenly, *Chandrahasa* broke off as he saw *Madana* entering the room in haste.

“Say now, when shall we celebrate the marriage?” he asked being anxious to get a reply.

“Before settling the time, I have first to persuade myself to consent to the proposal. I have not seen *Vishaya* yet and have no idea how she looks upon the match.”

“That is a trifling matter,” said *Madana*. “you may see her, if you wish, just now and know on personal enquiry what her attitude is.”

Chandrahasa nodded his head to indicate that he wished to see *Vishaya* before committing himself to any promise; as *Madana* left him to fetch *Vishaya* from the inner apartment the young prince sat there pondering over the whole affair.

“I shall first accuse her of a breach of faith and demand of her an explanation for the trick she played upon me, and only when I have satisfied myself with her confession shall I proceed in this matter.” So he thought when suddenly into his presence was ushered the maiden who, in the park, roused in him the first instincts of love; she had lost none of her former charm. Though in his presence her eyes were modestly bent down, she lifted up her

head and darted into his blushing face a look full of meaning. It was the same glance which, like a magnet, had drawn his heart in the park, and under its force he sat there for a time unable to ask her any question. When he recovered from the shock of her look, slowly he introduced to her the topic of the letter and asked her why she failed to meet him.

"Say you, my lord, that I failed, knowing as you do so well that you did not come in response to my letter? How long did I wait for you in the park under the prolonged torture of expectation?"

"I can't believe it as easily as you say it," said *Chandrasasa*. "I was there in good time and waited for you from early moonrise till the small hours of the morning."

"You speak of moonrise, on a new moon night, and imagine that I shall be simple enough to give credit to your story."

"No, not that; you asked me to meet you in the park at nine on a full moon night and—"

Chandrasasa could not finish his sentence before *Vishaya* broke in.

"At nine on a new moon night, my lord."

"No, it was on a full moon night that you had asked me to be present. I went there as early as seven o'clock, and what was the agony of my heart when for seven long hours I breathlessly awaited your

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coming, and was in the end sadly disappointed. I cursed the fate that had brought you in my way and forswore all relations with you."

"Thereby you did me less than justice, my lord, you condemned me without consideration. I do well remember that in the letter that I wrote you, a new moon night was chosen deliberately lest any busy gossip should know that we met. I went to the park just in time, and though I stayed there not longer than an hour, it was for me full of anxious moments. When at last you were not come, I feared the letter might have miscarried or that more important events had kept you back. The promptings of my heart were so insistent that I still hoped to meet you, and I am glad at the turn of events which has brought me again into the charm of your company."

The note of sincerity in her voice set *Chandrahasa* thinking. Perhaps, he thought, she was innocent, and the mistake might have been his. He was not quite sure whether, in the face of her assurance, he should insist that it was a full moon night which was fixed upon. Nor was the letter with him to verify the day, for he had torn it into pieces in a fit of anger. So, he persuaded himself that she was guiltless in the matter, and nothing now stood between him and *Vishaya* except the promise to *Champakavalli*. That, however, was a serious hindrance which could not easily be surmounted. The blood of a Kshatriya flowed in his veins though

he was blissfully unconscious of it; and to the plighted troth he would remain true for ever. But his heart had gone out first to *Vishaya* and nothing could really take it back. Caught thus between the two swaying passions of opposed interests, he sat there for a few moments completely lost in a labyrinth of thoughts.

Having waited long for an answer, *Vishaya* again lifted up her head and cast on him a gentle look which he could hardly resist. It was a most pathetic look, demanding an assurance that the lover was not in a position to give. He suddenly rose up to go and set at rest in solitude the warring thoughts in his mind, but she would not let him. "Pray tell me, my lord, what grieves you so much that you should abruptly go? My brother said that you wished to see me. May I know why?"

Chandrasahsa was reluctant to acquaint her with the thoughts that troubled his heart; but such persuasion lay in her tongue that he could not help telling her his story.

"Your father is the sole cause," he began.

"Of what?" enquired *Vishaya*.

"Of all these troubles."

"May I know which?" asked *Vishaya* in a submissive tone that suggested an anxiety to relieve him from his sorrow.

"Your father, the minister, sent me to *Madana* with a letter which, as he made me believe, referred

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to a mission of political importance. It was on my way to *Kaunthala* in pursuance of that affair that I saw you in the park. Your letter fell into my hands just a couple of days after. As I have already related, the events connected with it caused me a deep disappointment, and in that desperate mood an old woman caught hold of me and acquainted me with a girl—.”

“Which girl? may I know?” interrupted *Vis-haya* enquiringly, in a low voice. Her face grew pale and her tone faltered when *Chandrasahsa* began to relate this part of his story in a diffident and halting manner.

“The girl was none other than *Champakavalli*,” answered the youth. Scarcely had he mentioned the name of the princess, her friend, when the feeling that everything was lost, and that her schemes had come to naught rushed to her mind. She tried to control her feelings but so irresistible were they that at once she fell into a swoon. When, after a short time she recovered, the young prince was perplexed, and he doubted whether he should continue the story.

“Pray, proceed, my lord,” implored the maiden in a quivering voice, “tell me the whole of your experience.”

“And in that despondent mood I pledged my word to marry her.”

It was the anticipation of this contract that had roused in her overwhelming emotions; but when

the facts were actually revealed, she stood comparatively calm. A lingering ray of hope held up her drooping spirit.

"And so, my case is lost," said *Vishaya*, as if she had lost all hopes of marrying *Chandrasahasa*.

"Precisely that is the problem which troubles me," answered he, "your father's letter to which I referred proposed a marriage and nothing else. Had I been aware of it, I would not have given such a hasty promise."

"Is the promise everything?" supplicated *Vishaya*. In fact the knowledge that *Chandrasahasa's* word of honour had been given tormented her heart. There was no easy method to extricate him from it. Her only solace was in his confession that he would not have promised, had he been aware of the contents of the letter. There was evidence of his love for her and on that she hoped to build.

"Yes," answered *Chandrasahasa* to her question, "but is a promise a trifling thing on which you may go back at your convenience?"

"No, certainly not," answered *Vishaya*. "Far be it from me to persuade you to throw away your plighted word. On the contrary, may you be true to it like a Kshatriya king. But if *Champakavalli* breaks her promise, what will be your position, then?"

"Then shall I be easily absolved from my obligations. A contract lapses when one party to it

breaks off. But so stern is the king's daughter and so determined in her resolve, that there is no possibility of her ever being false."

Vishaya was surprised that *Chandrasahasa's* appreciation of her friend's character was so correct. Still, she asked him how he had inferred it.

"Instinctively I feel like that," answered *Chandrasahasa*, "so did she appear to me when I met her in the arbour in her park."

"How is it then," asked *Vishaya*, "that *Madana*, my brother, marries her next week? The king called for him a few hours ago, and though he was unable to go to the palace, he has intimated to us his desire that *Madana* should marry his daughter; and arrangements are already in full swing."

"That could not be a lie," thought *Chandrasahasa*. The rumour was now confirmed by one who knew things more intimately. He was more than half convinced that he could not, in any case, marry *Champakavalli*, and to guide his future steps he wished to collect more evidence.

CHAPTER-XVI

VISHAYA'S MARRIAGE

When *Chandrasahasa* went out to the streets of *Kaunthala*, the air was full of talk about the marriage of *Champakavalli*. On all sides of the city were agents purchasing provisions for the king;

and his loyal subjects vied with one another to supply him with all the necessaries for the marriage. Comments were freely made on the king's choice, and though young men liked *Madana* for his sociability and vivacity there was a general feeling of apprehension arising out of the unsteadiness of his character and the indifference of his attitude to the true values of life.

The young prince was extremely grieved to learn that *Champakavalli* had broken her word so easily and without an apology. His faith in the constancy of women was somewhat shaken, though in this instance it was greatly to his relief. True, he had given a promise to the princess; yet, there was no doubt that *Vishaya* fascinated him more: If he pledged his word to *Champakavalli* it was under the stress of circumstances. No longer was that word binding on him. Therefore, he made up his mind to marry *Vishaya*, and without any delay, he intimated his intention to *Madana*.

Accordingly, arrangements were made for the celebration of the marriage. *Madana* was anxious to go through it as quickly as possible in obedience to the instructions in the letter and he consulted the astrologers for the earliest auspicious day. He did not make any elaborate preparation, partly because he wished to have the marriage done in secrecy, and partly because his own marriage was to come off within a week. So much privacy was maintained over the affair that few of his neighbours

knew anything about it, and *Vishaya* herself was particularly careful not to invite her best friend, the princess.

At the appointed hour *Chandrahasa* came to the palace neatly dressed. There was a slight tremor in his heart because he had gone back on his word, but he had consolation in the thought that it was not his fault. He stood before the sacred Fire round which priests muttered indistinctly their mystic 'manthras.' By his side stood *Vishaya*, the queen of beauty. Her face shone and her eyes were radiant. It was the triumph of her life and she was conscious that it was of her own making.

After an hour, when the Brahmin priests had finished chanting their 'manthras' they raised *Vishaya's* hand and placed it in *Chandrahasa's*. It was a hand softer than *Champakavalli's*, and the touch of it thrilled him. The knitting of their hands was the consummation of his desire. It made the mystic contact that sealed the union of their hearts as of their lives.

CHAPTER-XVII

THE PRINCESS' STERNNESS

While *Vishaya* was standing in front of the Holy Fire with him whom she loved, *Champakavalli* was going through the agony as of hell fire. Her father had asked her to be prepared to marry *Madana*, the minister's son and she had refused.

"No, I will not marry him," said she to the king, her father. "Whatever your pleadings, I have made up my mind not to marry *Madana*, the gambler. I would rather remain single and die a virgin than choose him as the partner of my life."

"What is your objection?" asked the king, anxious to placate her feelings. May I know why so sternly you refuse to marry him?"

"I cannot say why; somehow or other I feel I ought not to marry him and I have made up my mind."

"You cannot make up your mind so easily and presume that we shall let things stop there. You must first tell us your reasons, and only when we are satisfied that they are sound, you can expect us to be persuaded to your way of thinking. First let us hear your reasons for not marrying him, and if your arguments are valid you may have your heart's desire. If, on the other hand, your fears are ill founded you must follow our advice."

The king's utterance of these sentiments was not very encouraging. It made his daughter feel that she could not have her own way in this matter. Her primary reason for so firmly refusing her father's proposal was the fact that in heart she was already wedded to *Chandrahassa*. Her solemn oath before the Fire fettered her for life. The young prince's picture was imprinted on her heart. This, she could not tell her father for fear. Yet, she was firm for she knew she was *Chandrahassa's* in weal or woe.

"I have no mind to marry the young man of whom you talk, father, and am perfectly certain that I will not." So said *Champakavalli* with respect and humility but the determination in her tone threw the king into a fit of anger. Not that he was enamoured of *Madana*, not in the least, but, the minister's son was the best choice he could make. The queen tried to persuade her daughter. Though *Champakavalli* was usually docile and obedient she was obdurate now and turned a deaf ear to all her mother's entreaties.

When persuasion failed, the king changed his tone and grew more serious.

"You must marry him," said he sternly, "I agree that my choice is not the ideal. There is another youth for whom I have been looking these twenty years. I have not found him yet ; and so you have to marry *Madana*. Be prepared, therefore; henceforth, let me not hear from you anything in the nature of a refusal.

Champakavalli bowed meekly to her father, resolving at the same time that she should prefer a life of an exile in the forest to one of ignominy and misery with the craven *Madana*. She would rather die than submit herself to such an unwilling partnership. However, her voice and desire did not count ; she had to yield to her father. She longed for death which seemed to be the only solution of her difficulties. Nevertheless, she would do that only

after the marriage was celebrated ; for she still hoped that things might take a different turn.

That day *Champakavalli* spent a restless night. It was full of sorrow and bitter agony. She tossed about on her bed in pain and grief. The more she thought of her lover, the sterner she grew in her resolve. At last, she called for her old servant and opened her heart to her.

“ If only you had not managed to bring us both together, I would have been spared all this bitter agony. *Chandrasahsa* has more than conquered my heart and I have no escape.

Moreover, I have pledged my word. I am not anxious to withdraw that and am not sorry that I also swore before the Holy Fire. But even if I wish to be absolved from my promise—which I do not—I cannot now ask for it. I am a *Kshatriya* princess and must keep my word.

My father forces *Madana* on me. I have no love for him. How may I override my father's desire for me ?”

The sorrowful expression of her face and the faltering voice in which she spoke awoke feelings of pity in the old woman's heart. She felt sorry for her and said :

“ Weep not, my child, that things have taken such a hostile turn. Disobey not your parents' injunctions, but pray to God that the longings of your heart may be fulfilled.”

"Say you then," asked the princess that I should yield to my father's instructions? No, I cannot do it. If he forces *Madana* on me, I have no way of escape except one."

"May I know what that one is?" interrogated the old woman.

"I shall then make an end of my life."

The old maidservant was sorry that the princess should be going through such intense sorrow as to threaten to commit suicide, in the event of being obliged to marry *Madana*. She employed all her skill and persuasive eloquence to deter her from such dangerous inclinations, but the princess was adamant. She held *Madana* in contempt and despised any dealings or alliance with him. However, the servant hoped that such constancy as that of the princess would eventually be rewarded, and went out of the room anxious to find a way out of the impasse.

CHAPTER-XVIII

THE FATHER'S RETURN

For more than three weeks *Dushtabudhi*, the minister had been staying with *Prahastha*. He had gone to further schemes which would bring him the immense fortune of three kingdoms. On his way, he had alighted at the palace of the king of *Chandanavati*, and contrived by most treacherous subtlety to remove the one hindrance which the Fates

had placed in his way. His success was most unique, and by the time he reached home Fortune would have played into his hands.

"Shall we start to *Kaunthala* for the marriage?" asked *Prahastha* at the end of a conversation, in which the minister had acquainted him with his deep plots. "It is already too late and as *Chandrahasa* is off your path, we can proceed in the matter."

"Yes, we shall start to-morrow. I hope my erratic son, *Madana* has stayed at home, and made all the necessary arrangements. No delay will then be caused and as soon as we reach home the marriage shall be celebrated."

The next day the minister and *Prahastha* started to *Kaunthala*. The latter was dressed in a gaudy costume. Glittering gold lace bordered his shirt and upper cloth. He wore costly bangles on his wrists, and his earrings sparkled in the sunlight. His face was clean shaven and moustache well-trimmed. He was careful to remove the few grey hairs, and on the whole, he thought he looked quite young.

They talked of many things on the way, and when they drew nigh to the palace of *Chandanavati*, *Prahastha* suggested that they should take another route.

"No," said the minister, "that is not wise. We will try to take the king along with us so that we may be above suspicion. Otherwise, the king may surmise that we have planned the murder of his beautiful son."

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Prahastha had no time to reply before they found themselves in front of the gate. Dismounting, they entered the court-yard of the palace; the king, warned of their coming, ran to meet them.

"Why is it that my son has not yet returned?" was his first question to the minister. He had been eagerly looking forward to the return of *Chandrahassa*. Though three weeks had passed, the young prince was not yet come. Strange misgivings filled his mind, but no suspicion fell on *Dushtabudhi*.

"I have sent him on an important mission," answered the minister. "It has much political significance and is expected to take not less than a month."

By this time the queen had joined them. She had dreamt that her son had fallen into the hands of treacherous assassins and had miraculously escaped. She did not tell any one her dream but brooded over it by herself.

"Why is my son not yet returned?" she asked the minister.

"I shall send him back as soon as I go to *Kaunthala*. I know you are very anxious to see him," replied *Dushtabudhi*. He then invited the king and queen to accompany him to *Kaunthala* to attend the marriage of his daughter. In their anxiety they would have followed him had he not told them that *Chandrahassa* would be back soon. However, they called the minister aside and presented him with two diamond rings, saying :

"Give one to *Vishaya*, your daughter and the other to your son-in-law. Let this be a token of our friendship and love."

The minister thanked them for their generous gifts and left the palace with *Prahastha*. On their way they talked of many things recounting in detail the plots which they had laid. They felt that they were in the tide of fortune and were determined to take the current as it came.

Within a few hours of riding they reached the palace. There was no decoration outside which they could see from a distance. Coming nearer, they saw *Madana* at the gate looking cheerful and happy in the thought that he had done things at the proper time and in the proper manner. The minister was a trifle displeased that the decorations and festoons were not elaborate enough.

"Have all things been done?" the minister asked his son as he dismounted from his horse.

"Yes." answered *Madana* with a cheerful smile. "*Vishaya* is at the height of her glory now and is immensely pleased with the choice you have made."

As soon as *Vishaya's* name was mentioned *Prahastha* came up closely listening to what *Madana* related. "There is for me, no end of bliss," thought he, "if *Vishaya's* attitude is such. I shall do my best for the good minister and see that he is set on the throne of three mighty kingdoms when he becomes my father-in-law."

As *Prahastha* was thus living in the realms of fancy free they entered the inside of the palace and were greeted by *Vishaya*. Her face was resplendent with joy and happiness as she approached her father respectfully. *Prahastha* winked at her slyly, and his heart leapt with the thought of the queenly vision that was soon to be his. Meantime *Madana* ran upstairs to fetch *Chandrasahasa* down. When they were descending the staircase *Dushtabudhi* looked up. Great was his disappointment to see the young man alive. He could hardly believe his eyes; so fondly had he imagined that the young beggar boy was out of his way and that the prophecy had come to naught. In an instant, the colour of his face changed: he bit his lips partly in resentment and partly in rage. *Vishaya* could not mistake the meaning and remained there speechless.

But more was yet to come. When *Chandrasahasa* came down, the minister smiled at him, suppressing his wrath for the moment; then he enquired of *Madana*, when *Vishaya*'s marriage was to be solemnised.

"Why? her marriage has been already celebrated and yonder stands her husband," said he pointing to *Chandrasahasa*.

To *Prahastha*, the news came like a bolt from the blue and he could scarcely think it to be true.

"What? Is *Vishaya* married?" he asked in surprise. The minister was still more perplexed. Not only was *Chandrasahasa* alive, but now he was his

own son-in-law. He could not understand how it had happened. He did not know what to say. He fretted and fumed. Rage choked his speech. He stared at *Madana* and then at *Prahastha*, and they both stood confounded. The minister, unable to stand any longer, dropped into a seat near by, and remained in a state of semi-consciousness revolving in his mind the contrary course of events.

CHAPTER-XIX

DEEP PLOTS AGAIN

When *Dushtabudhi* regained the normal composure of mind he called his son aside into a room and asked him to state the circumstances that led him so flagrantly to act against his expressed desire of giving *Vishaya* to *Prahastha*.

"Why did you act against my instructions?" asked he surging with rage. "You are a disgrace to the family and your actions one by one threaten to bring us to ruin. When I work for the prosperity and fortune of our family you turn down all our pet schemes with indifference. How can you reign supreme if my efforts are thwarted in this fashion? What obedient son will spurn like this his father's expressed directions, and act in a manner detrimental to his future?"

"I do not understand what you say, father. I received your letter but a week ago. First I had to

get his consent and as soon as I got it I had the marriage celebrated."

"Whose consent and for what?" asked the minister mad with anger. He could not control himself and got up from his seat to strike him a blow in the face. *Madana* at once ran up to his room to bring the letter which he had been careful to preserve; and coming down, he placed it in the hands of his father.

As the minister read through it he realised that a trick had been played upon him and his face flushed. Could it have been done by the gods? But there were signs to show that the letter had been tampered with by human hands.

"Where is the first letter that I sent you nearly three weeks ago?" asked he impatiently. "Did you throw it away as of no importance?"

"No, I received none save this," answered he, "and on this I acted promptly."

Dushtabudhi understood now that he had been befooled and that everything had gone wrong. But what strange agencies were at work to thwart his plans were not evident, nor was there any clue at hand to find them out. Restlessly, therefore, he paced up and down in his room, mumbling incoherently. In an adjacent apartment was *Prahastha* equally restless. For him, there was bitterness in the thought that the girl whom he had come all the way to marry had made a fool of him. Only one

thing relieved the intenseness of the awkward situation—he was no longer under any obligation to help the minister to the throne of *Kaunthala*. In fact, he went even so far as to think that the minister had cheated him.

Vishaya alone understood what agonised her dear father and was sorry that his heart was so vile. What course of action she should take in the matter was not very clear to her. She brooded over it for some time and at last made up her mind to tell the minister her part in the affair. With quiet steps she approached his room and tapped gently at the door. The angry minister was not at first willing to open it, but on further entreaty he let *Vishaya* in.

“Pray excuse me father,” said she falling at his feet. “I am the cause of your misery but thereby I have brought on myself endless bliss. Your first letter I destroyed, and your second, I corrected. I saw *Chandrasahsa* first in the park peacefully sleeping and my heart went out to him. Eager to know who he was, I went near; and my attention was arrested by the hand-writing on a letter in his pocket. The contents were most horrible; they pierced my heart like a dagger. So charming and handsome a person could not, I thought, be guilty of treachery such as to deserve your sentence. I persuaded myself to believe that it was a slip of your pen, and therefore made the relevant corrections. Your ‘Sathru’ I changed into ‘mithru’ and your ‘visham’ into *Vishaya*.”

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The unfortunate minister heard it all patiently and felt sorry that his own daughter had upset his plans. But hatred was too deep-seated to upset the balance of his wicked temper. He was an adept in the art of dissimulation. When his daughter was gone, his fertile brain again set to work more ingenious methods of getting rid of *Chandrahasa* once and for all.

“ Ah? would the Fates have their way in the end frustrating all my deep plots?” he began in soliloquy; “ What a pity that my own child should revolt against my actions. Perhaps it is a curse of the gods. I will not yield, nor like a weakling abandon my schemes. I will go on persevering to the end.”

There was only one way of saving *Prahastha* from the awkward position in which he was placed. Twice before he had attempted the murder of *Chandrahasa* and both times he had failed. But the third time he was sure to succeed. Therefore, without wavering he again set his heart on murder in cold blood. The most holy precincts of the temple were chosen for the perpetration of the foul deed and two sturdy villains as agents for the heinous purpose.

The minister rejoiced in the prospect of success that awaited him. As before, he sat with feverish anxiety waiting for the result. As if it were a good omen, just then a messenger arrived at the royal palace to say that the king had chosen *Madana* for

his daughter and that the marriage would be celebrated at once. The wedding was to take place within three days and the auspicious hour was at the fall of dusk.

The minister and his family spent a very busy time making elaborate and gorgeous preparations for the marriage of *Madana*. *Prahastha* helped them in all sincerity as he was aware of the minister's plans. He knew that once his rival was dead, *Vishaya* would be his and that the alliance of *Madana* with the the royal family would supply the minister with the stimulus to persevere in his endeavours. Therefore, he exerted himself untiringly in the preparations for the wedding and earned the unqualified praise of all including *Vishaya*.

The minister behaved towards *Chandrahasa* on terms of utmost familiarity and friendship. "Your parents are anxious to see you," said he to the young man, "but you shall go only after *Madana's* marriage. Here is the ring your parents sent you as a wedding present."

The youth was anxious to reply but the minister continued.

"It has long been our custom to offer a gift of sweet smelling flowers to the family deity to ward off danger and scare away the forces of evil. Will you not do it today before you attend the wedding?"

"Yes, I will," replied *Chandrahasa* who was scrupulously careful to oblige his father-in-law in every way.

As the shades of evening fell the young prince, having gathered some flowers from the garden, carried them in a golden tray to the family deity in the temple situated a few yards away. On his way, he met his brother-in-law returning home much agitated.

"Father is not at home," said *Chandrahasa*, "about an hour ago he left for the palace to pay the king a visit. He is not likely to return soon and has left instructions asking you to go to the royal palace in time."

"Before I go there," replied *Madana*, "I must see my father as strange stories are afloat in the city that *Champakavalli* has not yet given her consent to the marriage. Go you, therefore, first to the king's palace and bring father home; in the meantime I shall take to the temple the offering of flowers which you carry."

Unfortunately, *Dushtabudhi* was detained in the palace by the king who wanted to speak to him concerning the impending marriage. One of the state lords just then announced the arrival of an envoy from *Kerala*.

"Admit him," said the king.

The envoy entered the room; bowing low in deep deference he began to deliver the message from his master, "the king of *Kerala* bids me say that no subsidy will be paid. We cannot and will not pay tribute. I, on behalf of the Most Exalted King of

Kerala bid you open defiance, renounce all fealty and allegiance to the king of *Kaunthala*."

Until this climax of audacity there had been dead silence in the hall. Then burst a mighty shout of resentment. The king to whom this was an affront bit his lips and glared. His voice was choked with rage.

"He must be made to feel the weight of our hand," shouted the king in fury to *Dushtabudhi*, "hasten and mobilise more armies. Strengthen our forces and despatch them at once to occupy *Kerala*."

The strength of *Kaunthala* was formidable and few kingdoms could surpass its might and valour. The fame of *Kaunthala* forces was well-established and beyond dispute.

No sooner had the envoy departed than the lords of the kingdom crowded round their sovereign with eager offers of service should war be declared.

The war, coming as it did at this time, was a distraction to the schemes of the minister but he saw in it a chance of furthering his own ambitious designs and an indirect way of rewarding *Prahastha*, his accomplice. He thought that it was going to be a short war and end in a few campaigns.

"*Prahastha*, your majesty," said the minister, "is a brave and fiery spirit among us. He will do well to be our commander-in-chief."

With a look of pleasant condescension the king approved of the minister's choice. In his heart of hearts the minister felt glad at what seemed to him a stepping stone to his future success. New men were recruited and disciplined; the army was sent to take the field under the command of the minister's confidant, *Prahastha*.

Every one was excited, *Chandrahāsa* had no peace of mind when he heard the story of *Champakavalli's* apparent obstinacy for he found himself at fault thereby. However, he consented to do *Madana's* bidding, and leaving the tray in his hands hurried to the palace in search of *Dushtabudhi*. His conscience rebuked him sternly, and though there was nothing to extenuate him from the guilt that weighed heavily upon his heart, the thought that in *Madana* the princess had a suitable husband was a little consoling. On the way, however, the rumour that he had heard intensified his sorrow and he cursed himself for having been the cause of her unhappiness.

Very different was the spectacle that greeted his eyes when he reached the palace. All outside was merry and gay while within the house was going on a grim fight between a young girl on one side and the whole world on the other.

CHANDRAHASA

CHAPTER-XX

THE PLOTS RECOIL

A short while ago when *Chandrasahsa* was entering the palace he was much hesitating. He had left his home on a mission of great import and far-reaching consequences. But recent happenings were wide of the mark. Yet things had so far advanced as to render retrospection useless. Still his disloyalty to *Champakavalli* harrowed his soul.

At the time of his arrival *Champakavalli* was in her room weeping bitterly. She had sternly refused to marry *Madana* whatever her parents might say, and had made up her mind to commit suicide should her father force him on her. Nevertheless, the king had asked his men to go on with the preparations as he hoped to win her round to his way ultimately.

The appearance of *Chandrasahsa* in the palace court-yard caused a sensation among the workers there. "Who is this youth of such handsome appearance?" asked they among themselves. "He looks like a prince of a neighbouring province and would be a much better husband for the princess than the gambling *Madana*."

"Whom do you wish to see?" asked a courtier coming up to *Chandrasahsa*, "you seem to be a stranger to this place." "Not quite," answered the prince, wishing to be led into the king's presence.

When the king saw the prince entering his room he was deeply struck by his personality and stood

up in respect to the young man, realising that the stranger was a Kshatriya prince. He looked at him from head to foot and was surprised to find a form so perfect. The king would have asked him if he was married but for his strong sense of decency and delicacy.

“May I know what your name is and from where you come?” asked the king with much greater respect than he would ordinarily show to young lads of that age.

“My name is *Chandrasahsa* and I come from *Chandanavati*.”

“Do you then know the king of *Chandanavati*?”

“Yes, I do, I live in the palace of the king.”

“How long then have you been there?” asked the king getting curious to know more about the young man.

“For over a dozen years,” replied the youth. “I was bleeding in the forest where the king of *Chandanavati* had gone a-hunting; he took pity on me, a poor and unhappy boy, and carried me to his palace where I have been cared for and brought up as his own child.”

This piece of information excited the king's curiosity in greater measure. He gazed at the youth for long when suddenly his eyes fell on a mark on his right arm. The king looked at it intently and his eyes beamed with the delight of a discoverer.

"Perhaps, he is the youth I have been looking for these twenty years," thought he. "There is no doubt that he is of royal blood. I shall study the mark more closely before I let him go."

"Please, stay here for a few moments. I shall return soon," said he to the young man and went to the secret chambers of the palace to read the letter which he had received many years ago from the king of *Kerala*. "The nature, description, and position of the amulet mentioned in the letter," said he to himself, "answer the one at hand so exactly, and the general appearance of the youth confirms his parentage to such a degree that I shall have *Champakavalli's* marriage immediately cancelled." He grew more and more determined in this resolve as he read and re-read the letter. The firmness of *Champakavalli* was another argument in his favour; he did not know what he might do in the event of a forced marriage, so he called the queen to his presence and told her confidentially the new situation created by the arrival of the prince on the scene.

Without giving him any reply the queen hastened to the guest chamber to catch a glimpse of *Chandrasahasa*. No sooner did she see the majestic figure than she decided that she would have none other for her son-in-law save this youth.

"We shall postpone the marriage with a view to abandoning it ultimately," said she to the

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king, "and I hope that our daughter will not look with the same indifference and dislike upon this youth as on *Madana*."

The proposal met with the entire approval of the king. The queen hastened to the apartments of *Champakavalli* carrying the good news.

Meanwhile *Dushtabudhi* was getting impatient and restless. *Madana* had not yet arrived. "I am extremely sorry that your son has not arrived so far," said the king. "It is already past the auspicious hour and we have to postpone the marriage. As for settling another date I shall take counsel with the astrologers and inform you in time."

Dushtabudhi, unprepared for such a disappointment, cursed his son for his stupidity. What was worse, he now feared that things might take a different turn. Knowing as he did the uncompromising attitude of the princess, he felt instinctively that all was not well and that things had gone amiss. However, insisting on the point that a Kshatriya's honour lay in keeping to his word, the minister left the palace with a heart full of ominous forebodings.

On his way home a confusion of thoughts arose in his mind. "Ah! how fortune makes a fool of me at every turn! When I am nearest to success success is farthest from me. Oh! tantalising mockery! A house divided against itself! My very children set my schemes at nought—first *Vishaya* and then *Madana*—they in turn cut across my plans. It is

a strange irony of fate. But what will the gods do when *Chandrahasa* is out of the way? For his death have I plotted and when he is gone the throne shall be mine."

The journey back home was tedious and long; and as the minister entered the house he came to learn that *Madana* had gone out into the city and had not returned yet. Perhaps, he might be in the gambling house, thought the minister, and he went out alone to search for him. On the way was the temple of the family deity where he had sent *Chandrahasa* on an errand of death many hours ago. The delay in his return assured the minister that this time the executioners had done their work. To make sure that the deed had been done, he groped his way in the dark into the Holy Shrine. What was his delight when he stumbled upon a corpse which the glimmering light of the stars lit up feebly!

"Now is the trouble at an end," murmured he in the stillness of the sanctuary, "and the Fates have suffered a reverse. Three kingdoms in one stroke! Ah! this is a glorious triumph. I am on fortune's back, and shall ride on post-haste to my goal."

The exultant minister returned home that night full of joy. Never before in his life had he felt such overflowing joy as on that fateful night. He soothed his troubled soul in secret. There was now no need to search out *Madana*, and so the minister returned home happy in the thought that the greatest

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hindrance in his way was removed. Reaching home he fell down fast asleep. It was the soundest sleep he could get after so many months of anxious nights. Poor man! his glory was short-lived. He heard a strange cry from the palace court-yard at break of day.

"The precincts of the holy temple are polluted by human blood and a horrible crime has been perpetrated on the minister's son." That was the alarm which two courtiers raised. The minister heard the cry but he dozed unperturbed; he knew that it was not his son but his son-in-law that was the victim. Yet in the general confusion of the palace he pretended to be visibly moved. He went to the temple attended by courtiers. His heart was glad but his face feigned sorrow. Within a few minutes, he arrived at the scene of horror. On the white parapet walls that fenced the entrance to the holy shrine were drops of blood crying for vengeance. It was then that the wicked minister felt the stern rebuke of conscience for the first time in his life. Striving to stifle it he proceeded to where the lifeless body lay. The skin was a little darker than *Chandrasah's*. He shook a little with fear. But he comforted himself saying that it might be due to the loss of blood. As he turned his eyes fell on the severed head that lay in a corner. He picked it up as if in grief. It was a face as lovely as the lotus flower. Suddenly he looked aghast. His strong frame shook as in a fit of fever. He looked at it again with failing con-

sciousness and he had scarcely opened his mouth to speak before he fell down flat upon the ground, his head striking the hard stone of the pavement.

When the minister came to his senses he was like one half-mad. In desperation he wrung his hands, tore his hair and stamped upon the ground. Over his thoughts he had no control and began to lament aloud :

“ Ah ! foolishly I have followed the devices of my heart. My plans have recoiled upon my head. Oh ! perversity of fate ! for twenty years I built my hopes upon his life and at last the axe that I aimed against the beggar boy has fallen upon the neck of my own son. The first executioners took pity on him and left him free to live. When I arranged to have him poisoned my own daughter was his saviour. When I rushed still headlong, heedless of all warning, to attempt the life of him whom I pursued so long, the weapon recoiled in my own hands and laid low the very heir of all my hopes.

Ah, woe is me to have been born in this world. *Madana* is gone—my son, *Madana*—and he shall no more return. His death takes the motive out of my life and removes even the roots of my race. Life to me shall henceforth be bitter and heavy and therefore, let me die.”

The aged minister rose and struck his head against a piece of hard rock. His followers rushed to rescue him from the fit of despair but it was of

no use. The vengeance of the gods could no longer bear the sight of the wicked and the wily; and *Dushtabudhi's* life ebbed out of him to its swift close to join the company of his departed son.

CHAPTER-XXI

RELIEF AND RELEASE

Chandrasahsa had not left the court of *Kaunthala* yet and continued to stay as the guest of the king. Although *Subudhi* had postponed the marriage of his daughter he had by no means settled as to who should marry her. From that point of view his interest in the guest was greatly roused especially after he saw the amulet on his arm.

"Could he be the son of my friend, the king of *Kerala*?" he wondered; "the resemblance is so close and his manners so dignified that he must be the same person of the Kshatriya stock referred to in that letter."

Meanwhile the king and queen of *Chandana-vati* began to grow nervous at the long-continued absence of their foster-son. They yearned for his return night and day, and at last set out to the court of *Subudhi* in the hope of meeting *Chandrasahsa* there. Messengers were sent ahead of them to announce their arrival at the court of *Kaunthala*. In spite of the distance, the journey was pleasant and enjoyable. The decorations made for *Madana's*

marriage were still there and afforded a hearty reception to the royal pair from *Chandanavati*. After the formal courtesies between an overlord and a feudatory were exchanged, *Subudhi* and the king of *Chandanavati* entered into a very interesting conversation, in the course of which they talked about the prowess of *Chandrasasa* in subduing the rebellious chieftains. "Who is this lad, *Chandrasasa*?" inquired the king, "I thought you had no son."

"Tis true, my lord, that we had no issue and that we prayed God to give us a son. My wife had always exhorted me to abstain from hunting the gazelle and condemned the pleasure thereof as malicious," replied the king of *Chandanavati*.

"The next time when I went to the forest with the determination not to kill the animals I met this boy there and brought him home. Who could have thought the reward of such abstinence would be so rich and enduring a legacy? He is our comfort in old age and our strength in trouble. In fact, it was he who quelled the might of those rebellious chieftains who had refused to pay tribute. We have lavished our love and built our hopes on him."

"Do you know the king of *Kerala* who was killed some twenty years ago?" asked *Subudhi*. "He was my friend. At the time of the insurrection I had a letter from him entreating me to take care of his little son. The general appearance of

Chandrasahsa answers the description in that letter. He may be the son of the dead king of *Kerala*."

"He may be the same boy," said the old king of *Chandanavati* who was very pleased to know something more about the parentage of *Chandrasahsa*; "his bearing and manners are dignified like those of a true Kshatriya prince."

"Yes, you seem to have a son whose life is full of romance," said *Subudhi*. "He is grown up. You are well stricken in years. Is it not time for him to be married and made to relieve you of the heavy responsibility of ruling the kingdom? You are proud of your son. Why, for that matter I should feel proud if I had as illustrious a son as you have."

"True, your majesty," rejoined the aged king, "we were waiting for his arrival at *Chandanavati*. It is several weeks since he left us. Now that we have come we may be able to settle his marriage also. The sooner we are able to do it the better."

"We are arranging to find a suitable husband for our daughter, *Champakavalli*," interrupted *Subudhi*. "Of course, *Madana*, the minister's son is a good lad. But *Chandrasahsa* is an equally worthy suitor."

"Excuse me," replied *Chandrasahsa*'s father taking the hint, "will it not be better to ask *Chandrasahsa* himself?"

Chandrasahsa was called into the presence of the two kings. Meanwhile *Subudhi*'s wife had got scent of the interview between her daughter and the old

woman from whom she got to know the real reason for *Champakavalli's* refusal to marry *Madana*. She was in heart already wedded to *Chandrasahasa*. That was the truth.

The king of *Chandanavati*, addressing his son said, "It is high time to think seriously of your marriage. The strain of administration is more than I can stand in my dotage. We have longed to see the day when you shall with your wedded wife rule over the kingdom of *Chandanavati* which it is our great pleasure to bequeath to you. Get settled in life and cheer us up in our old age. What do you think of *Champakavalli*? She is fair and of priceless virtue, young and well-accomplished."

Chandrasahasa could not evade answering the question so bluntly put to him. "Pardon me, my father, prudence requires that I say nothing on the spur of the moment. It is unwise on my part to give a definite reply until I know what the attitude of *Champakavalli* is on the matter," replied the youth.

Immediately *Subudhi's* wife arranged for an interview between *Champakavalli* and *Chandrasahasa* in an adjoining room.

"I beg your pardon, most fair lady," said *Chandrasahasa* greeting *Champakavalli* as she came into the room. "I know your goodness and have had occasion to know your loyal devotion to me.

Since meeting you last I wandered over several places and at last reached the house of *Madana* for whom I was taking a letter from his father. There, by a curious device of which I was totally ignorant, I was constrained to marry your friend, *Vishaya*."

"Marry *Vishaya*!" exclaimed *Champakavalli* in surprise.

"Bear with me, kind lady," continued the prince, "my vow before the holy fire checked me throughout from taking such a course as apparently meant inconstancy of love to you. If it were not for what I heard, that *Madana* was to wed you, I would never have swerved from my allegiance to you."

"What! my lord," she cried in utter amazement, "are you changed so soon and married to another? I stood against the whole world for your sake. But you have forgotten and surrendered the claims of helpless *Champakavalli* without any pity. Despise me not, O gentle lord, what other joy have I on earth without you. Life has no meaning or joy if you forsake me."

The words pierced the heart of *Chandrasahas*. The force of her appeal was irresistible. He wished he could undo all the past; but the past was irrevocable.

"You have *Madana*, kind lady," said he comforting her; "he is as good as any other, if not better. Your parents want you to marry him. You will

please your parents immensely and deserve their richest blessings if you but obey them."

"How I wish I had known this earlier, sire," replied the king's daughter, "it would have saved me from all the agony and needless anxiety. Should you also on whom I built my hopes leave me helpless I have no other—". She could not finish her speech and fell into a swoon.

While the world sped on its onward course unmindful of the tragedy in the neighbourhood, the house of the minister was enveloped in an atmosphere of gloom. The news of the deaths of *Madana* and *Dushtabudhi* spread like wild fire. The inquest held over their deaths and the evidence of the courtiers brought to light all manoeuvres made by the minister for his self-aggrandisement.

Messengers with the mournful news came running to the palace. The queen asked them what was the matter. "The minister and *Madana* are no more; the son was murdered and the father died of grief," reported one of the servants. The queen breathed a sigh of relief.

The king who was otherwise engaged in the palace came out to see the unusual crowd gathered outside. The queen reported to him the sudden death of *Dushtabudhi* and the murder of *Madana*.

"Dead!" cried the king, "how did the minister die?" he added horrified. The messenger replied, "the minister's daughter, *Vishaya* told us

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that her brother, *Madana*, having gone into the temple to make an offering of flowers yesterday evening was found murdered this morning. ”

Chandrasahsa who was in the adjoining room heard this and came running to the place where the king was inquiring into the cause of the minister's death. He said to the king, “the minister sent me yesterday evening to the temple close by with an offering of flowers. As I was going I met *Madana* who asked me to go and see his father on his behalf while he offered to go to the temple for me. What an unfortunate man *Madana* is! How fleeting is life ! ”

As they were thus striving hard to get at the truth, the police brought two men arrested on suspicion. By threats and other such means they were made to confess their guilt. They could not hide the truth as the minister who instigated them to do this had already died. In despair, the two criminals began to give out all the secret designs of *Dushta-budhi*.

“We have no malice or spite against any one, sir ; it was the minister who, with fair promises of reward enticed us to this unpardonable crime. ”

“What did he ask you to do ? ” asked the *Kotwal*.

“He gave us the hint that we are to murder the one who came into the temple to offer flowers. Accordingly, we lay in wait in one of the niches for

the man with the tray of flowers," said one of the assassins.

"Did he not tell you who the person was?" repeated the police officer.

"I have forgotten,—yes, now I remember; he said something about the king of *Chandanavati*," replied he. The other, after hesitating a little said, "yes, master, I know, he said it was the prince of *Chandanavati*."

Chandrasahsa was surprised to hear that the minister had hated and plotted against him so treacherously. He said to himself, "he smiled and seemed friendly; that he was a cut-throat no one would have dreamt." Suddenly he remembered the minister's proffered love and assistance to him when he set out from *Chandanavati*. He could not reconcile that embodiment of goodness that he took him to be once with that personification of villainy that he was depicted to be by the murderers. He gave me a letter that I may get help from his son. On the contrary, it was a low trick to get his daughter married. These were at cross-purposes. There is no doubt that there was some ulterior motive behind all that he did. He was a villain:" Such were his thoughts.

The court knew how the minister fell a prey to his own evil designs. The biter was bitten. Further inquiries made in the minister's household disclosed that *Dushtabudhi* was trying to kill *Chandrasahsa* ever since his astrologer had told him that some day

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Chandrasahsa would become king of *Kaunthala*. It sounded strange, none the less it was true. Retribution was too long in coming. When it came it was terrible. The sins of *Dushtabudhi* found him out. The court was in mourning over their deaths. Great fear fell upon the people when it was revealed that it was the just and sudden visitation of the gods upon the wicked.

Chandrasahsa was excited. He had no peace of mind. However, the situation that stared him in the face was more serious. The thought of the solitary *Vishaya* in sorrow and the pathetic sight of *Champakavalli* lying so dejected and helpless made him very sad. Thinking of the latter, he said to himself, "what will happen if she were to know that *Madana* is dead? There is none else to marry her and I am bound by my promise to her. *Vishaya* is in bereavement and I wonder what she will say if she comes to know of my father's proposal, that I should marry *Champakavalli*. Wretched fate, how it dogs my heels and fetters my freedom!"

CHAPTER-XXII

THE REVELATION

It was evening when the sun, subduing his fierce rays turned his car aslant and sunk slowly behind the summit of the hill. The birds retired to their nests; the hermits, after their evening ablutions lit their fires, the smoke of which rose in many columns

above the forest trees. *Champakavalli* just recovered from her swoon. Thereon, *Chandrasahasa*, excusing himself for the night plodded his weary way towards *Vishaya's* house. Everything there was still and seemed desolate. The usual cheer and mirth of the home was no longer there. *Vishaya* was immersed in despair and her only comfort, her lover had just returned.

At the very sight of *Chandrasahasa* tears gushed down her cheeks. She burst crying, "alas, alas, my heart is breaking; sorrow is sapping the strength of my body. My father, my brother, all gone. What an unfortunate creature I am! The whole world seems a desert; why have you left me destitute?" *Chandrasahasa* comforted her saying, "be not downcast; there is no fighting against fate. These things are as they are, and there is an end. The mills of God grind slowly but they grind exceeding just; man cannot alter their decree."

Chandrasahasa was calm and collected as he comforted his wife but within his mind raged a conflict like the froth and foam in the abysmal deep of a water-fall. Few could judge from the physiognomy what internecine struggle went on within. The look was very deceptive. The events of the day saddened him very much and left an impression in his mind that he was born to suffer for ever. "What is life?" he cried in solitude, "is it to suffer and labour like this all the days of my life? Others live smiling and call life pleasure. To me the cup of life has been

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dealt in another measure. Where success is within reach, my happiness is marred by unforeseen and tragic events. My boyhood was full of tribulation. I was left in a wild and uninhabited region to the mercies of nature and the wild animals of the forest. My parentage is shrouded in a mystery and remains sealed to my eyes.

I was persecuted and left bleeding in a forest. Even where I was pursuing the calm and secluded tenor of my life in far-off *Chandanavati* I was lured to a life of adventure in unknown lands by the minister, *Dushtabudhi*. Cursed be the day when they said that a male child was born! As my life drifted slowly into other channels, of which I had no cognisance when I left the home of my foster-father, greater responsibility was thrust on me, an inexperienced youth. What responsibility and what anxiety!

When fortune was generous enough not to frown on my humble birth, melancholy has marked me for her own. How impossible to escape the relentless fate of '*Karma*'! I have gone back on my promise to *Champakavalli* and become a traitor to her. *Vishaya*, whom I married is now in tears. She mourns the loss of her father and brother. Death has laid its violent hands on the family and taken a heavy toll and *Vishaya* is bereft of all comfort. Poor *Madana*! killed before his time, in the prime of youth, at the height of happiness at the prospect of marrying

Champakavalli—and killed in the most solemn act of worship. It may be that those whom the gods love die young. But I continue to fatten like an ox in a stall with no sense of shame. What an anomaly of life! I was the cause of all the misfortunes. It is better for me to die than suffer a living torture. I am disappointed with my very self. I shall avoid all agony and pain by putting an end to my life in that very temple stained with the innocent blood of *Madana*."

The introspection was, no doubt, very searching but he halted long between two opinions. He was not quite sure whether he was wise in deserting *Vishaya*. However, after a great deal of hesitation, he left the house and plunged into the darkness of the night, all alone.

The city was wrapped in silence. Everything was quiet and dark except for the dim lamps that kept burning in tall towers and for the wind that made the leaves rustle. *Vishaya* who was restless the whole day went early to bed. Nobody was about except the murderer, the robber and the wild animal that kept the wicked vigil. The path leading to the temple of the goddess of *Kali* was all the more unfrequented because of the recent murder. *Chandrahasa* walked a few paces and turned back. He saw the lamp burning in the bed-room of *Vishaya* who was sound asleep unmindful of the movements outside. It was a touching sight. He stood lingering and his courage failed him.

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"Am I a woman and has this miserable life become so sweet to me? Fie upon it and away with compunction," said he.

This time he did not change his mind. On and on he ran till he reached the hallowed spot. The sight that greeted him was terrifying and the memories it evoked, dreadful. The twinkling lamps threw a faint light on the image placed within the holy of holies.

In earnestness and reverence he prayed, "O, Supreme Being, dreaded among the people, Stern Mistress of the Voice of God, Thou that art many limbed, I offer myself to Thee a willing sacrifice. Absorption in Thee is sweeter to me than life. I have wrought ruin and woe wherever I went; My misfortune has infected others. My guilt I have laid upon others; The doom that awaited me fell upon another. It is expedient that one suffers for the good of others. Thou dost remove iniquity and punish the unjust. Punish me, even me who has forfeited Thy love and mercy by trespasses without number. Accept Thou this life even as I lay it before Thy altar." So saying he unsheathed his sword to slay himself.

"Hold thine arm," said a voice and *Chandrasahsa* felt his arm firmly gripped by one of the many hands he saw before him. It was the goddess with her many limbs. Around her shone a lustre that surpassed the splendour of myriads of moons. The

light dazzled his eyes and his heart palpitated with fear.

"Hurt not thyself," commanded the goddess, "thou art my beloved ward in whom I am well pleased. I have been thy guiding genius from the beginning of creation. Thou hast a purpose to fulfil. Throughout thy changeful lot thou hast only been our trusted messenger, carrying out our ordinances and decrees. Despair not and do not be worried over the deaths of *Dushtabudhi* and *Madana*. The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children and their children's children. So was it in the case of the minister and his son. *Dushtabudhi* was plotting against thy life and met with his just doom. *Madana* fell a victim to the plots of his father. It was a tragedy of high ambitions self-defeated.

Go and prosper; Thou shalt inherit three kingdoms and needst have no scruple to marry *Champakavalli*. She will be a devoted wife and a true helpmate; I have blessed *Vishaya* though she be the daughter of the minister; She will share thy joys and sorrows. Perfect harmony shall reign in thy home.

I shall go with thee in all thy ways; of life. Call on me and invoke my aid in times of need; and thou shalt have my support. Farewell!"

Chandrasahsa stood dazed with fear. The vision passed before his eyes, as if in a dream. Though it was beyond the range of ordinary human experience he realised that he had been specially blest by the



“ Hurt not thyself ”

deity. He returned home with revived hopes and a fresh outlook upon life. He crept back into the palace before dawn and woke up early morning as if nothing had happened.

He shared his wife's fasts and lamentations, with her put on the garb of mourning and performed the obsequies in honour of the dead.

CHAPTER-XXIII

THE REWARD OF PATIENCE

Time, the healer of all wounds and sorrows brought comfort to the troubled soul of *Vishaya*. She drowned her miseries in the company of her husband.

Chandrasahsa, having spent several days in the house of *Vishaya*, thought it wise to break to her the news of the proposal made to him by his parents to marry *Champakavalli*.

"Loving *Vishaya*, *Madana*, your brother, who should have married *Champakavalli* is no more," he said, "my promise to her I have broken and married you. The sin of faithlessness stands ever before me and I know of no propitiation to atone for my sin. I would not have been a traitor to *Champakavalli* had I not acted on what you told me. There is, as far as I know, only one way out of the difficulty."

"What is that, my lord?" interrogated *Vishaya*.

"If you two agree to live like sisters as you have lived in the past as friends," continued *Chandrasahsa*, "sharing the joys and sorrows of my life I shall have the satisfaction of having fulfilled my pledge and there is no greater joy for me than to be able to do that."

"My lord, in your happiness is my happiness, in your service is my freedom. *Champakavalli* and I have been good friends hitherto and I feel that it is but the mercy of Providence that means to knit the bonds of union closer than before in our common allegiance, love and service to you," she replied.

Chandrasahsa was delighted to hear the wise words spoken by *Vishaya*. He had not anticipated such a sensible reply from her.

"Well-spoken," exclaimed the prince, "your beauty has won my admiration and now I know your prudence as well. This, I hope, will stand you in good stead in all the trials of your life." *Chandrasahsa* suggested that they paid a visit to the palace.

The prince set out with *Vishaya* and reached the palace of *Subudhi*. *Champakavalli* received her friend very hospitably. The strange meeting of kings, queens and princesses was unique. All was now happiness at *Kaunthala*.

The king of *Chandanavati* had to explain to *Subudhi* how the marriage of *Chandrasahsa* to the two ladies, *Champakavalli* and *Vishaya* was a comedy of errors. The marriage had been celebrated

in secret and without any royal splendour. Now the formal marriage was to take place in all pomp.

Just then a messenger arrived announcing the victory of the *Kaunthala* forces over the armies of *Kerala*. He said, "Prahastha, our commander-in-chief was mortally wounded and he succumbed to his wounds. The king of *Kerala* also perished in battle and it is for us to annex the kingdom of *Kerala*." It was a happy augury of the approaching event.

Invitations were sent to all parts of the three kingdoms of *Kaunthala*, *Chandanavati* and *Kerala*. The auspicious day was fixed and festive crowds of wedding guests assembled from all sides.

It was a rare time of merry-making when the long-wished for wedding of the heir of three kingdoms took place. As the cheerful note of the marriage trumpet was sounded the priests chanted their sacred spells sanctifying the matrimony of *Vishaya* and solemnising the marriage of *Champakavalli* with the prince, *Chandrasahsa*.

Subudhi, blessing the bridegroom said, "we are well pleased to greet you as a son, eminent among the worthiest, redeemed from misfortune and treachery. May your enemies be trampled under foot. All that is ours is now yours. The chieftain of *Kerala* who killed your father has already been punished and his kingdom, annexed. May you prosper with the fair daughters of our land, *Vishaya* and *Champakavalli*."



"Reign supreme... Chandanavati"

The aged king of *Chandanavati* was filled with tears of joy as he drew near his foster-son ; and approaching him said, "my son, may the goddess of peace and plenty smile on you ! Pursue honour and fight for the right. Be just and merciful. May your enemies be vanquished ! Reign supreme as the thrice crowned king of *Kerala*, *Kaunthala* and *Chandanavati*. May you be blest with children and live happily with your queens !"

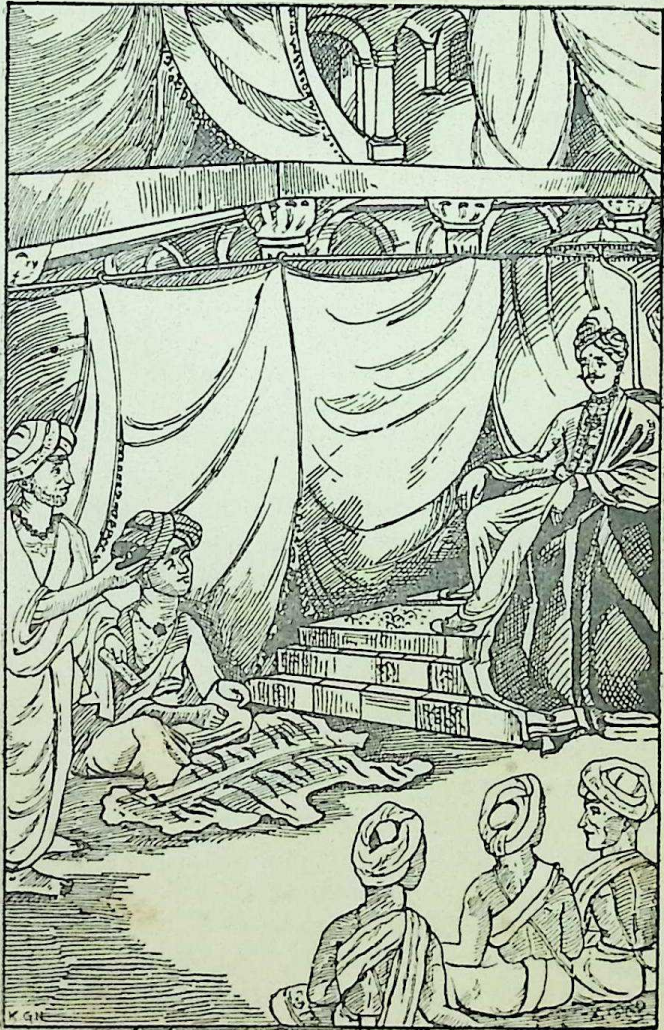
The crowd that had gathered felt and shared the sentiments in the words of the two kings. They knew that it was the good sense, pluck and gallantry that rewarded the prince with wealth, rank and beauty and they all joined in the chorus,
"Long live *Chandrasahsa*."

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"O Monarch ! hear and rejoice "